

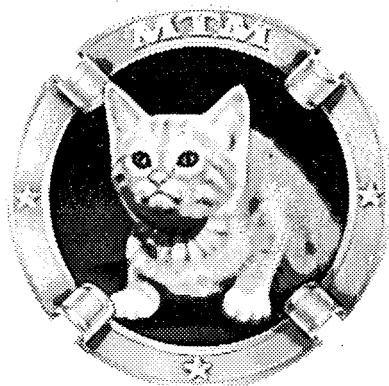
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INTRODUCTION: COMPONENTS OF THE NATIONAL FILM CULTURE

Film is very much part of the information technology revolution. It is, after all, a piece of software – a very viewable, attractive and interesting piece of software.

– Kenneth Baker, former Minister of State for Industry and Information Technology, including the film industry¹

British Film Year is about commerce. It's not about art. Maybe it should have been, but it's not.

– David Puttnam, steering committee member, *British Film Year*²

This issue of *Screen* takes as its object 'British cinema' – not as a purely academic enterprise but in order to investigate the structures and processes of national cinema as an instance of hegemonic struggle. What is the relationship between cinema and national identity? What role does cinema play in the construction of nationhood? How has the institution of cinema historically been constructed both economically and culturally? Of what use is it to speak of an homogenous 'British cinema'? What is the relationship between 'British cinema' and the independent film and video movement? What has been institutionalised as 'British cinema'?

Recent years have seen repeated claims by critics and film-makers alike for a renaissance of British

cinema. And the year beginning in March '85 has been officially designated the 'Year of British Film': a well-funded domestic and international campaign to promote both 'British' films and the practice of cinema-going (in an attempt to entice audiences away from their videos and back into the cinemas). At the same time, the film industry itself has been the object of an unusual amount of attention from the Government and related bodies in the last couple of years – although one might note that effectively the purpose of that attention has been to disengage the Government by de-regulating some of the main principles of British film policy, and, as many people have argued, by removing the financial bases of the current renaissance. Thus, the 1983 Monopolies Commission report on distribution and exhibition avoided making any firm proposals for fundamental changes in the structures of ownership and control in the industry – structures which date back to the inter-war period, as Robert Murphy's contribution to this issue demonstrates. 1984 saw, first, the abolition of the capital allowance tax shelter scheme (a key means of funding film production since 1979), and second, the publication of the Government's White Paper on *Film Policy*, proposing the abolition of the Eady Levy on ticket sales (along with the winding up of the quota regulations) and the replacement of the National Film Finance Corporation by a privately funded company. In a Thatcherist vision of the economy, Government 'interference' is an obstacle to free enterprise and healthy competition – and certainly Kenneth Baker (recently succeeded by Norman

¹ Quoted in interview, *British Film Institute Film and Television Yearbook 1984*, London p 79.

² Quoted in 'Bums on seats', *City Limits*, October 6-31, 1984, p 4.

³ See in *British Film Institute Film and Television Yearbook 1984*, London, p 79.

4 Lamont) sees the film industry as one of the healthier parts of the national economy³. Like *British Film Year*, the Government's consideration of the industry continues to be dogged by that perennial failure to find any happy relationship between economic and cultural questions. This is in marked contrast to the relations which exist between the State and the film industry in France. While Alan Stanbrook, discussing the capital allowance issue in the 1984 Budget, notes that the scheme has meant that 'films have been treated in just the same way as a piece of plant and machinery'⁴, Jack Lang, the French Minister of Culture, has described the recent and important Bredin Report on French cinema as 'an attempt to redefine the way the economy of the French cinema works, within the context of an ambitious cultural policy'⁵. It would seem that this is precisely what is missing from the plans for *British Film Year*.

At another level of the film culture, and for somewhat different reasons, there has been, in the last few years, a growing interest in and work on British cinema history among film and media teachers, and film critics, theorists and historians: several books and articles have been published, while more are promised from other publishers—in particular, BFI Publishing, who have several titles on their lists, one of which is intended to accompany a huge retrospective season of British films currently running in New York's Museum of Modern Art. A number of courses, schools and conferences have also concentrated on British cinema history, notably the 1983 British Film Institute Summer School on World War II and British films and television, the subject also of a

recently published dossier, *National Fictions*⁶, and the 1984 BFI Summer School on British film and television in the '50s. No longer, it seems, do we need to regard British cinema as 'the unknown cinema' (Alan Lovell), or as 'utterly amorphous, unclassified, unperceived' (Peter Wollen)⁷.

This is, then, the context in which this issue of *Screen* appears. The purpose of this introduction is not simply to foreground what we see as the key issues of the articles which follow, but to sketch in greater detail some of the components of this national film cultural context, and in so doing to contribute to the continuing debate over how the institution of cinema in Britain should be conceptualised.

Any examination of the provenance of a national cinema in this country must pay particular attention to the documentary film movement of the 1930s, in relation both to British cinema, if indeed we can speak of such a unity, and, as Steve McIntyre attests in his contribution to this issue, to Scottish film culture. Interestingly, Jeffrey Richards, in his recently published and extensive volume on British cinema in the '30s, sidesteps any such investigation, on the grounds that the documentary movement 'has been exhaustively chronicled and analysed elsewhere'⁸. In fact, we would suggest, the chronicling of the movement has been mainly from the standpoint of the documentarists themselves, while the most far-reaching critical analysis of the movement—notably Don MacPherson's *Traditions of Independence*—is excluded from Richards' list of such work.⁹

Philip Dodd and Rob Colls' contribution to this issue usefully extends such analysis, in particular by tracing the Griersonian discourse back to political and social debates at the turn of the century, noting, for instance, the similarity between the Griersonian position and the 'Into Unknown England' writing of the late nineteenth century. The link which they thereby establish between the documentary impulse in British film culture and this late nineteenth century social anthropology is a useful adjunct to Mick Eaton's recent film, *Darkest England*, which implicitly draws similar connections between the two cultures in its examination of the 'nationalist' mentality of the English middle classes of the 1880s: the film explores the inter-relationships between the missionary ethic, imperialism and the middle classes' relationship with the working classes in the Victorian city. The third strand of Eaton's film is a teasing examination of middle-class masculinity and sexual repression:

⁴ Alan Stanbrook, 'When the Lease Runs Out', *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1984, vol 53 no 3, p 172.

⁵ Quoted in Jill Forbes, 'The Bredin Report', *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1982-3, vol 52 no 1, p 28.

⁶ Geoff Hurd (ed), *National Fictions: World War II in British Films and Television*, BFI Publishing, London, 1984. See also Christine Geraghty's review of the Summer School, 'National Fictions', *Screen*, Nov-Dec 1983, vol 24 no 6, pp 94-96.

⁷ Alan Lovell, 'British Cinema—The Unknown Cinema', BFI Education Dept Seminar Paper (Xeroxed), 1969. Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, London, Secker and Warburg in association with BFI, 1972, p 115.

⁸ Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace. Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, p 4 (our emphasis).

⁹ Don MacPherson (ed), *Traditions of Independence*, BFI Publishing, 1980. See also Annette Kuhn, '"Independent" Film Making and the State in the 1930s', *Edinburgh '77 Magazine*.

this focus on the male body is itself continued in Dodd and Colls' examination of the *visualisation* of the 'working man as hero' in the '30s documentary film. This celebratory *mise-en-scène* of the working-class male body performing its decreed function of manual labour reduces the working class, they argue, to the masculine gender seen from the point of view of the social conscience of a self-consciously privileged class. As such the working class is assigned a specific place (as hero-victim) in the desired hierarchy of a 'democratic' nationhood.¹⁰

For a moment, in the '30s, the documentary movement, as the most loudly-voiced sector of the non-commercial cinema, was able to usefully, if ambiguously, raise questions about the social function of cinema. To entertain or to educate? To seek to construct, through a cinema of seductive spectacle, a profitable international audience? Or to set an agenda for a 'new democracy' for the domestic audience? But as the realist arteries of the documentary movement hardened into rigid lines of demarcation within the British film culture, so these questions about the social function of cinema have been blocked off. As a result, the independent film and video movement of the '70s and '80s has in the main, with one or two notable exceptions such as Amber and Cinema Action, been forced to challenge the legacy of British documentary realism by a Brechtian political aesthetic. Further, as Colin McArthur notes in his polemical appraisal of British film reviewing in this issue, there has been and remains an abrupt schism between those theorists, critics and film-makers aligned in various ways with the independent film and video movement and those more obviously aligned with the mainstream of 'British cinema'.

In the present conjuncture, this has had two noticeable effects: first, much of the recent writing on British cinema history has been bound, in a severely limiting way, to the British documentary realist aesthetic; and secondly, the claims for a current renaissance of 'British cinema' are almost totally divorced from the claims for a new social function of cinema from the ranks of the independent film and video movement.

Several of the articles published here take a fresh look at the legacy of realism: in addition to the piece by Dodd and Colls, we would also cite here the articles by John Hill and Carrie Tarr.

Hill's examination of the '50s British social problem film begins by noting that the genre is precisely an extension of the Griersonian discourse into feature film-making practice: such films were read at the time of their release as sociologically significant contributions to 'national education'. But rather than reproducing this deeply ingrained assumption about the social worth of such films, and the possibility of reading the 'message' of the film off the lines of its dialogue—as so many previous critics have done—he pays attention to the specific processes by which meaning is produced in these films. McArthur notes in his article the failure of British film reviewers to take into account the processes of scene construction and *mise-en-scène* in their appraisal of each week's new releases. Hill shows how this failure to consider the effectivity of the formal aesthetic strategies of film is indeed a failure to examine the status of the epistemology of vision upon which British documentary realism so resolutely sits: in many social problem films, he notes, 'what we are told is subverted by what we actually see', yet the *intended* 'message' of the film is, for all intents and purposes, carried in the dialogue. Hill thus examines the forms of construction of the social problem in such films and reveals their failure to maintain a consistent rationalist attitude towards the 'problem' in question.

Carrie Tarr's article also examines one of the same social problem films as Hill—*Sapphire*—but takes a somewhat deviant line by refusing the social problem object which the film's dialogue offers her (racial difference as problem), in order to explore how the film constructs a further problem object—female sexuality. She links *Sapphire* not to another film from the social problem genre but to *Darling*: her project is to consider the extent to which the two films contribute to the contemporary debate in the late '50s and early '60s over the domain of the sexual. She shows how the narrative work of the films both constructs and then contains the threat of a positive female identity and female sexuality.

These articles deal with the articulation and representation of markedly 'social' themes and ideological concerns within the films discussed: representations of sex, gender and gender relations, of race, of youth, and of the nation and its 'social problems'. The ways these representations and issues are discussed largely derive from general theoretical work within the fields of film and cultural studies, work that has stressed the role of representation within the ongoing construction

¹⁰ For a similar analysis of later British 'realist' films, see Andrew Higson, 'Space, Place, Spectacle', *Screen*, July-October 1984, vol 25 nos 4-5, pp 2-22.

6 and reconstruction of 'the social' and has found its focus in conjunctural analyses: the ways in which representations can be located within specific historical moments and periods.

Analyses of this kind, however new in method, can be located within a longstanding tradition, one which seeks a means of discussing those films through reference to British society. In contrast to work on Hollywood, for instance, where issues of aesthetics and style are as much to the fore as issues of ideology and society, where *Rebel Without a Cause* is as likely to be discussed in terms of its genre (melodrama) or its auteur (Nicholas Ray) as it is in terms of its 'overt' subject matter (youth, youth culture and the 'social problem' of the generation gap), British cinema has very predominantly been discussed in terms of its social themes and its relation to British society. Jeffrey Richards' *In the Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939* is simply the most recent and thoroughgoing example of this work. While there is much in Richards' book that is useful in thinking through the formation of the institution of cinema in Britain, we might note that its discourse is predominantly metonymic, amassing great detail in a descriptive mode, while its capacity for analytical explanation is severely curtailed. The cinematic processes of signification are effectively reduced to their external referents, such that films can be read as 'straight historical evidence' (General Editor's Preface), and are seen as mass cultural artefacts (see, for example, page 6). The attempt to relate 'cinema' and 'society' is overtly framed within an argument which draws on a Gramscian notion of hegemony, but this is no more than a claim for radical academic credibility; the discursive work of the book constructs a much more familiar and naive idea of cinema 'reflecting' society, in a language of promoting as opposed to constructing and reproducing ideology, of projecting consensus and maintaining the status quo on the part of the Establishment, rather than the contestation of hegemony within and between opposing classes. The emphasis on censorship as a constraint on film production, while adding usefully to our knowledge of the British Board of Film Censors, at the same time constructs an essentially conspiratorial argument which then denies the need for a thorough investigation of ideological struggle, particularly at the level of the formal work of the film text.

As we have already noted, this means of treating British cinema and British films has, in the past at

least, been accompanied by an aesthetic of realism, within some of the films, certainly, and within the theoretical framework adopted by the critics and writers discussing them. Partly for this reason, a vast number of films which cannot be accommodated within the fold of British documentary realism have (with important exceptions) been excluded from debates about British cinema. Moreover, while the new work has adopted much that is new in its theoretical framework and terminology, the films it tends to focus on (and the films it tends to exclude or to marginalise from its analyses) remain substantially the same. There is discussion of *Millions Like Us* or *Sapphire* or *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*; there is no discussion of *Black Narcissus* or *Dracula*. Virtually the only recent work to cross the barrier has been the work contained in the BFI dossier on Gainsborough Melodrama¹¹. In other words, the work is still orienting itself by a map of British cinema drawn up many years ago.

British cinema no longer seems 'amorphous, unclassified, unperceived', but we must take issue with the rigid classifications (between 'realism' and 'fantasy', for instance) that have been erected. There has been very little work which has (or has even attempted) to re-draw the boundaries, to make new connections and links, to *re-write* the history of British cinema either from a directly political standpoint or from a standpoint which might be labelled theoretical or even academic. This is likely to remain the case as long as representation as a term is reduced to its referential connotations (as in 'representations of...' supply your own noun) and so long as there remains a missing link in the chain of analysis between the films, on the one hand, and 'society' on the other. That missing link is the cinematic institution in general and the British film industry in particular. A great virtue of the Gainsborough melodrama dossier is its insistence on the importance of the cinematic *both* at the discursive level (working with a generic category and insisting on the importance of fantasy) and at the industrial level (Gainsborough as a specific production company with its own particular routines and forms of organisation).

One of the problems with the realist aesthetic as it worked itself out in film-making and film reviewing is the assumption that the 'good' and 'worthy' film self-consciously represents the

¹¹ Sue Aspinall and Robert Murphy (ed), *Gainsborough Melodrama*, London, British Film Institute, 1983.

contemporary preoccupations of the conjuncture – and by extension the ‘authentic British’ film is one which deals with contemporary *British* life. Such preoccupations must constitute the manifest subject matter of the film (as in the social problem picture). The function of *mise-en-scène* is limited to iconic representation and a deliberate use of metaphor is effectively forbidden. The great usefulness of the studies of Gainsborough melodrama – and of Hammer’s and Powell and Pressburger’s films – is that it enables recognition of the ways in which all cinema as the imaginary signifier works over the fears, anxieties and desires which constitute the ideological matter of the conjuncture.

Interestingly, however, the recent claims for a renaissance in British film-making, both through the films themselves and the reviewing which markets them, has to some extent shifted the terms of debate, while still remaining bound to a severely limiting conception of the social function of cinema. Among the recent glut of articles proclaiming the renaissance, it is worth singling out three interventions; Charles Barr’s and Thomas Elsaesser’s extremely pertinent contributions to a series of articles in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* and James Park’s study, *Learning To Dream: The New British Cinema*.¹²

The interest in Park’s book is the degree to which it is symptomatic of a specific position in contemporary British film culture. It is an argument for a particular reading of the ‘renaissance’, drawing extensively on interviews with a number of directors. The central plea is for a cinema whose specificity is quite distinct from television. As both Barr and Elsaesser note¹³, the relationship between cinema and television is today once again the source of a major anxiety among film-makers, but it is also central to any consideration of contemporary British cinema. Park’s is simply the most

explicit (because the longest) attempt to overcome that anxiety. Like earlier attempts to differentiate cinema and television from the standpoint of cinema¹⁴, its argument in part concerns the status of the cinema image and the social experience of cinema: the cinema image is bigger, and more spectacular, and the spectator’s relationship to it more intense and committed than is the case with the thoroughly domesticated television image. But the conclusions which Park draws from this – and it is here that we can see a shift in the terms of debate about the status of British cinema – are that television is *as a consequence* better fitted to the self-conscious representation of contemporary social and political themes in the documentary realist aesthetic. This aesthetic does not require (or fails to exploit) the full *visual* possibilities of the film medium, nor the intensely passionate and emotional experiences with which ‘pure’ cinema can deal. Cinema is thus left free to ‘dream’; to explore what for Park defines the medium – intense emotional experience in a universal form (cinema is – must be – universal because it can reach large public audiences...). In this account, cinema is an *art* (not a political tool), which depends upon visual *style* (not simply linear narrative), and the director’s personal vision which can explore universal human values. The favoured form is not ‘realism’ but ‘fantasy’ – magic realism, allegory, metaphor – an apparent about-turn for dominant British film culture....

In fact, as John Ellis has shown, the key terms in this discourse of art cinema have been emerging in British film culture since the ’40s.¹⁵ Park’s book is yet another attempt to call into being an industrial space within which ‘creative film making’ can develop, and a key plank in his argument is that ‘the vitality of a film culture depends on its diversity’ (p 61). In developing this pluralist argument for cinema and film culture, he effectively sidesteps the constant tension in so many previous proposals for a healthy British cinema. Instead of *either* a policy of high production values and high budget films aimed at the international market *or* small films intended for the domestic market, *both* strategies must be part of a coherent and forward looking cultural policy for British cinema. Park links this proposal to an argument for a multiplicity of distribution and exhibition facilities.¹⁶ But his policy remains detached from the ideological implications of the independent film and video movement. That movement is reduced simply to *films*, whose work Park cannot under-

¹² Charles Barr, ‘Conundrum for England’, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1984, vol 51 no 607. Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Images for England (and Scotland, Ireland, Wales...)’, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1984, vol 51 no 608. James Park, *Learning To Dream: The New British Cinema*, London, Faber and Faber, 1984.

¹³ See also Special Feature on British Cinema, Penelope Houston et al, ‘Life before Death on Television’, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1984, vol 53 no 2, pp 115-122.

¹⁴ See Steve Neale’s discussion of various strategies employed by Hollywood to ‘renew’ cinema, ‘Hollywood Strikes Back – Special Effects in Recent American Cinema’, *Screen*, vol 21 no 3, 1980, pp 101-105.

¹⁵ John Ellis, ‘Art, Culture and Quality – Terms for a Cinema in the ’40s and ’70s’, *Screen*, Autumn 1978, vol 19 no 3, pp 9-50.

¹⁶ Elsaesser makes a similar proposal, *op cit*.

8 stand ('films such as *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *Song of the Shirt* represented the primal scream of those alienated from contemporary currents in British culture and society', p 21). Their accompanying strategies of alternative *modes* of distribution, exhibition (not just different venues) and education are lost.

This hegemonic process of calling into being a (relatively) homogenous 'British cinema', the product of a desire for a national cinema, becomes the project of many interventions: even Barr's article in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* assumes that we can still speak of a homogenous national cinema, and in so doing constructs and reproduces the category of 'British cinema'. But it is clear that such a project is only possible if the claims of the independent movement are ignored, for they implicitly challenge the idea of a unitary British cinema of conventional feature-length narratives.

Similarly, in the pages of that influential British film journal, *Sight and Sound*, the forms of argumentation have barely altered since they last worried over the possibility of a British film renaissance 25 years ago. The extent of a cultural policy for 'British cinema' in the pages of this journal is as vague as 'providing funds for pictures that might otherwise not have been made', such as 'slightly risky, low budget pictures'¹⁷ which might involve 'quality craftsmanship' and tackle 'more ambitious and relevant material'¹⁸. The looseness of the argument is reminiscent of the programming at Regional Film Theatres and Film Societies prior to the development of the strategies of structured programming in the late '70s. It is not enough to simply show/make films which would not otherwise be shown/made.

In this context, Steve McIntyre's contribution to this issue of *Screen* is timely and important, relating arguments about national cinema to the new nationalism of Thatcherism and the failure of the left to construct a coherent challenge to that nationalism; he goes on to examine, not *British* cinema,

but the challenge of independent cinema and film culture in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and its relationship to the core/periphery struggle over national identities. It is a much needed antidote to the celebration of a 'British cinema renaissance', questioning rather than promoting the institutionalisation of national film cultures.

One of the major blockages to the development of independent cinema, or indeed the pluralist film culture championed by James Park, has been the deeply entrenched positions of the cinema exhibition circuits in this country. Robert Murphy's article here examines the monopolistic development of exhibition between the wars. Murphy's contribution to recent British cinema history has been a consistent economic history – not so much a 'revisionist' history (as in Gomery's work on Warner Brothers and the introduction of sound in the American film industry¹⁹) as what might be called an 'expansionist' history, filling in the details of the story of the economic development of the film industry in Britain, only sketchily appraised in existing accounts. His account here of patterns of exhibition in the inter-war period can usefully be read alongside Richards' in *The Age of the Dream Palace*.²⁰

Both studies provide useful information on the extent and nature of cinema-going as a key social practice in the '30s, which does not so much supersede as inter-relate with other forms of the leisure industry such as music hall/variety and restaurants. The architecture of cinema building and the showmanship of cinema managers in the period instituted a specific regime of spectatorship – cinema as spectacle, a machinery of 'escapism' – summoned once again in the discourses of the current British renaissance.

We end this introduction with two more quotations for British Film Year. The first is from a *Screen* editorial published eighteen months ago, the second from Thomas Elsaesser's recent article in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*:

*The national culture out of which a national cinema must necessarily emerge is itself an ideological construct, a necessary pre-condition for the return of box-office monies from abroad where 'Britishness' is presently a precious, if precarious, commodity.*²¹

*The renaissance provokes the question of what could be a national cinema, what has it been, and in what sense is it desirable?*²²

ANDREW HIGSON and STEVE NEALE

¹⁷ Alan Stanbrook, 'A farewell to Alms?', *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1984, vol 53 no 4, p 242.

¹⁸ Penelope Houston, introduction to 'Life Before Death on Television', op cit, p 115.

¹⁹ See, for example, Douglas Gomery, 'Writing the History of the American Film Industry: Warner Brothers and Sound', *Screen* Spring 1976, vol 17 no 1, pp 40-53.

²⁰ See also Murphy's review of Richards' book: 'British Artefacts', *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1984, vol 53 no 4, pp 304-305.

²¹ Mick Eaton and Paul Kerr, 'Editorial', *Screen*, July-October 1983, vol 24 nos 4-5, p 2

²² Thomas Elsaesser, op cit.

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FANTASY WORLDS: BRITISH CINEMA BETWEEN THE WARS

BY ROBERT MURPHY

I

¹ Caroline Moorehead, *Sidney Bernstein: A Biography*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1983, p 7.

TIME HAS NOT been kind to the picture palaces. A handful of pre-1914 cinemas like the Electric Palace, Harwich and what is now the Electric Screen in London's Notting Hill, have miraculously survived into a second age of small cinemas, but the luxurious 'supers' of the inter-war years have proved more ephemeral than the films shown in them. The few that survive intact do so as rock venues or bingo halls. More often, crude modernisation carried out in the '50s or '60s has played havoc with their exotic interiors and left them in a stylistic limbo between past and future. Cinema architecture does now attract a considerable band of aficionados, but there has been little attempt to examine the social and economic importance of these massive monuments to the inter-war period.

The cinema enjoyed its first boom in the early years of the century. Between 1908 and 1914 a spate of building activity produced a wave of Gems, Bijous and Picturedromes. Most were simply barrel-vaulted buildings with a seating capacity of 200 to 400. Though more ambitious cinemas, like London's Hackney Pavilion and Maida Vale Picture House, were being erected by the end of the period, live entertainment still appeared to be more profitable and more prestigious. Audiences flocked to Sir Oswald Stoll's Coliseum with its great revolving stage, and to Sir Edward Moss's Hippodrome where elephants slid down chutes into a 100,000 gallon tank and Red Indians negotiated terrifying rapids.¹ Though growing in power and influence, the cinema as yet had nothing to equal the huge East End melodrama palaces whose cavernous interiors accommodated audiences of over 3,000.

Once wartime restrictions were relaxed the building of big 'super' cinemas began in town centres – including the West End, hitherto a bastion of the music hall and theatre – and the inner suburbs of London and the major provincial towns. But the British economy was slow to adjust itself to the post-war world. Before 1914 over two-thirds of British investment flowed abroad to finance railway development and loans to foreign governments. After the war opportunities for profitable overseas invest-

ment shrunk and British companies which had previously financed expansion from their own reserves were encouraged to look to the Stock Market for funds. The period between 1919 and 1929 was the Golden Age of the fraudulent company promoter: Horatio Bottomley, the demagogic, hard-drinking charlatan whose spectacular frauds failed to prevent him being elected Independent Liberal MP for South Hackney, James White, the Lancashire bricklayer who came to own Daly's Theatre and a fine string of race-horses before making a good-humoured exit owing over a million pounds, and Clarence Hatry, 'the apostle of irrationalised rationalisation', who played ducks and drakes with the finances of Wakefield Council—all achieved a notoriety unsurpassed even by the Blooms and Slater-Walkers of the post-war affluent society.

Britain escaped a financial disaster on the scale of Germany's currency collapse or America's Wall Street crash. But it did suffer two more modest Stock Exchange scandals. The first, the Armistice Boom of 1919-20, developed out of the bonfire of government controls which occurred soon after the end of the war. Industries starved of capital during the war turned to the Stock Exchange for funds to re-equip and expand. Some companies, such as Leyland Motors, Lever Brothers, Dunlop, British Cellulose, and Crosse and Blackwell, had reasonable expectations of future prosperity, but others, in declining sectors of the economy such as cotton textiles and shipbuilding, took advantage of a temporary boost in demand as wartime shortages were made good, to present a totally spurious picture of their profitability. The contemporary fashion for rationalisation and scientific management made it easy for unscrupulous promoters to launch mergers of cotton mills, steel plants, shipbuilding yards, which were merely excuses for hoisting unprofitable concerns on a gullible investing public. As one commentator put it: 'The experienced ship-owner sold, the ignorant man bought and the banks financed the deal.'² The £1 shares in James White's Amalgamated Cotton Mills were worth only 1½d by 1927, and the fate of Hatry's British Glass Industries was equally ignominious.³ More typical though were the companies which limped on through the '30s, desperately trying to extract some small profit from their grossly over-capitalised concerns by cutting wages and combining together to keep up prices.

A handful of film production companies—Stoll, Hepworth, Ideal—were launched during the Armistice Boom, and Lord Beaverbrook's Provincial Cinematograph Theatres (PCT)—the only substantial circuit of cinemas then in existence—increased its capital to £3 million. Most of the '20s cinema building, though, was the work of small entrepreneurs with a tradition of involvement in the entertainment industry: Israel Davis and his sons, who built the 3,000 seat Shepherds Bush Pavilion in 1923 and expanded into the West End with cinemas in Shaftesbury Avenue and Marble Arch; A E Abrahams, owner of the Blue Halls, Hammersmith, who took over the London Theatres of Varieties circuit to convert into cinemas; Sidney Bernstein; the Black family; the Hyams brothers; Sol Levy. Finance was generally raised locally from banks and insurance companies; apart from PCT, only London Theatres of Varieties, an old-

² W A Thomas, *The Finance of British Industry 1918-76*, London, Methuen, 1978, p 28.

³ Aylmer Vallance, *Very Private Enterprise*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1955, p 135.

established music hall circuit, had a stock market quotation. It was not until the fiasco of the 1927-29 New Issue Boom that the investing public became intimately involved with the film industry.

The cinema prospered, but it did so on a diet of American films. The dismal performance of British film production attracted increasing attention as the '20s wore on. At the end of 1926 it was revealed that protective government legislation was imminent and rumours began to circulate of a merger which would bring together important interests in all three branches of the film industry – production, distribution and exhibition. The prime mover was Isidore Ostrer, who with his brothers Mark and Maurice, ran a small merchant banking house. Their early career is shrouded in mystery but they are known to have participated in the Armistice Boom, promoting Amalgamated Textiles, a merger between two important Lancashire cotton mills, Daniel Illingworth and Morris and Co; and in May 1921 they helped R C and A C Bromhead, managers of the Gaumont company in Britain, buy their independence from the French parent company.⁴

In anticipation of the 1927 Film Quota Act, they organised an altogether more ambitious intervention into the film industry, proposing a merger between Gaumont, two well-established distribution companies, Michael Balcon's Gainsborough Pictures, and two cinema circuits: the Davis Pavilions and the E E Lyons Biocolor circuit, a mixed bag of small and old-fashioned halls, the attractive, modern Savoy cinema in Grimsby and the 3,000 seater Britannia, Shoreditch, the last home of popular melodrama in the East End of London. The idea behind the Ostrer merger was that, with government backing, a major British film concern could compete effectively with the American companies, but hardly had they launched their two and a half million pound Gaumont British Picture Corporation than they were caught up in a stock market boom which opened up yet greater possibilities.

Having burned their fingers speculating in the 'safe' old industries during the 1919-20 boom, investors were eager to try their luck with the new industries in which the future now seemed to lie. Between 1927 and 1929 some 277 companies in such fields as 'electric light power and telegraphs', rubber, gramophone and radio manufacture, 'hotels, theatres and entertainments', photographic processes (including Clarence Hatry's ill-fated Photomaton Parent Corporation and its offspring, inadvertently backed by Wakefield ratepayers), film production, artificial silk, safety glass, vending machines and a sea-going fish-canning factory, were launched on the Stock Exchange. Most were to disappear into bankruptcy by 1931 but the Ostrers were able to take advantage of boom conditions to expand their newly founded empire.⁵ In competition with a rival group centred around financier F A Szarvasy and music hall impresario Sir Walter Gibbons, the Ostrers began accumulating small circuits of cinemas under an umbrella organisation, Denman Picture Houses. By April 1928 it had reached a strength of 96 and included the Bernstein and Hyams cinemas. By the end of the year Gaumont-British controlled over 300 cinemas, having bought out the Beaverbrook interests in PCT

⁴ Companies House Records; Illingworth Morris; Gaumont British Picture Corporation.

⁵ R A Harris, 'A Re-Analysis of the 1928 New Issue Boom', the *Economic Journal*, September 1933, pp 453-7.

and taken over the rickety Szarvasy/Gibbons enterprise (General Theatre Corporation) whose assets included the London Palladium, Charing Cross Road Astoria and Kit Kat Club.

Isidore Ostrer was a currency reformer and economic expansionist who acquired *Sunday Referee* and published a book, *The Conquest of Gold*, in his efforts to popularise neo-Keynesian ideas. His career offers interesting parallels with that of the American financier Waddill Catchings, who masterminded the metamorphosis of Warner Brothers into a major company. But whereas Catchings went on to advise Roosevelt on how to finance the New Deal, Ostrer's ingenuity was expended on intricate financial deals which bordered upon chicanery. Leaving the day-to-day running of the company to his brothers Mark and Maurice, Isidore only appears to have played an active role in acquiring new off-shoots to his empire and in entering into convoluted financial negotiations which enticed first William Fox, and then John Maxwell of the rival ABC circuit, into buying large slabs of over-valued shares in the company in the hope – continually frustrated – of gaining control.

The vigorous entrepreneurs who had built up the constituent parts of the corporation – the Davises, the Hyams, Bernstein, the Bromheads, Simon Rowson of Ideal, Will Evans of PCT, even Michael Balcon and C M Woolf, who rose to positions of great power in the organisation, found it difficult to work there and left. Attempts to integrate the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests gathered together under the Gaumont-British banner were half-hearted. Isidore Ostrer was far-sighted enough to buy up companies involved in sound equipment, radio, and television, but he rapidly lost interest and did little to develop their potential. Like many of the inter-war mergers, Gaumont-British remained a ramshackle empire heavily dependent on its monopoly position – the book-ing power of a circuit of 300 cinemas – for its profitability.

Shareholders of the more healthy parts of the corporation – notably PCT – resented having to subsidise some of the dubious, over-valued cinemas bought up by Denman and GTC. Matters came to a head in 1938 when accumulated losses on film production threatened to plunge the whole empire into the red. Disgruntled shareholders, finding a powerful ally in John Maxwell, persuaded the Board of Trade to carry out an inquiry into the company. An inspector was appointed and preliminary investigations begun, but a take-over bid from J Arthur Rank and the outbreak of war intervened to prevent the emergence of embarrassing revelations.⁶

II

It is fashionable now to see the '30s in terms of economic growth – to weigh the two million cars in the balance with the three million unemployed and come down in favour of the England 'of arterial and by-pass roads, of filling stations and factories that look like exhibition buildings, of giant cinemas and dance halls and cafés...'. Now that we have three

⁶ Public Records Office
BT 58/249 9077
(1938).

⁷ J B Priestley, *English Journey*,
Harmondsworth,
Penguin, 1934, p 375.

million unemployed and economic decline, it is no longer so easy to condemn the bad old days of the Slump when high unemployment was at least accompanied by economic growth.

Economic historians argue that decline in the old staple industries – cotton, steel, shipbuilding – was more than made up for by the growth of new industries – cars, electricity supply, light engineering – supplying consumer goods to a prosperous domestic market, which was also better served by public transport, new housing, and entertainment industries like football, greyhound racing and the cinema. The building boom which had gathered pace through the '20s was only momentarily checked by the confusion over the coming of sound and the onset of the Depression. John Maxwell's ABC circuit, founded in December 1928, grew to a strength of 160 by the end of 1931. The mammoth 3,800 seat Davis Theatre in Croydon opened late in 1928 and in the following two years Arthur Segal's Astorias were erected in several parts of London – Brixton, Streatham, Finsbury Park and the Old Kent Road. Sidney Bernstein freed himself from Gaumont-British and with the capital acquired from the sale of his first circuit began building his Granadas, the sort of lavish dream palaces he thought the public deserved. Despite complaints about the ruinous cost of installing sound equipment and the new percentage charges levied by the American majors on their 'talkies', cinema exhibition remained prosperous.

With prices falling it continued to make economic sense to build cinemas. Low material costs – timber, steel, the new, light Fletton bricks – low labour costs in a casually organised market, and after the Gold Standard was abandoned in 1931, low interest rates, encouraged exhibitors like Bernstein, Oscar Deutsch, C J Donada and David Bernhard to launch ambitious building programmes. Their activities provoked considerable anxiety about 'overbuilding' and 'redundancy'. Many of the smaller, non-circuit cinemas operated on low profit margins and were very vulnerable to new competition.⁸ Even in the large cinemas wages were low, hours long and employment dominated by fear of the sack for minor misdemeanours. The prosperity of the cinema was never sufficient to instil complacency. Attendance increased but only marginally; it was only in the extraordinary conditions brought about by the war that the yearly total topped the thousand million mark.

Overbuilding did sometimes bring about ludicrous situations such as that at Horsham where the 15,000 inhabitants found themselves spoilt for choice when the three existing cinemas owned by the Blue Flash Cinema Company were supplemented by an Odeon and a Union cinema. Union, the Bernhard circuit which acquired or built 150 cinemas between 1933 and 1937, openly admitted its determination to secure local monopolies. As Bernhard *filis* candidly revealed, 'Our policy is not to compete with other circuits, but to control the situation in the towns where we acquire a theatre or have a partially dominating position.'⁹

On the other hand Sidney Bernstein would only build after comprehensive market research as to the need for a new cinema and carefully kept in touch with his audience by means of detailed questionnaires. The

⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly*, April 12, 1934, p 4 (a report that 1,200 cinemas, about a quarter of the total, operated with box office receipts of between £1 and £8 a day).

⁹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, November 7 1935, p 3.

exotic Granada interiors had less to do with extravagance than with a carefully calculated assessment of audience requirements. According to Theodore Komisarjevsky, the cosmopolitan theatre director responsible for them, they were intended to supply 'folk with the romance for which they crave. The richly decorated theatre, the comfort with which they are surrounded, the efficiency of the service contribute to an atmosphere and a sense of well-being of which the majority have hitherto only imagined. While there they can with reason consider themselves as good as anyone, and are able to enjoy their cigarettes or their little love affairs in comfortable seats and amidst attractive and appealing surroundings.'¹⁰

Oscar Deutsch adopted a different approach. Rather than attempting to break in to the traditional strongholds of popular entertainment – the town centres and the areas of highly concentrated working class housing – Deutsch built his Odeons almost exclusively in new centres of prosperity and population: suburbs and dormitory towns like Surbiton, Hendon, Uxbridge, Kingstanding, Shirley, Chingford and Rickmansworth; the rapidly developing sea-side resorts like Bognor, Bournemouth, Blackpool, Lewes, Clacton, Ramsgate and Weston-Super-Mare; the new centres of light engineering like Peterborough, Luton, Reading, Loughborough, Ipswich and Wolverhampton.¹¹

In contrast to the cathedral-like Astorias and Granadas, Deutsch's policy was to build relatively intimate cinemas which were modern and fashionable, functional and stylish – everything that his expected audience strove for in their bright new homes. He conceived the idea of 'brand-selling' his cinemas, utilising the economies of standard design to achieve high standards of comfort and service. Odeons were built explicitly as Odeons, clearly marked by the massive use of cream faience tiles and bold red lettering. By building his own cinemas rather than acquiring other people's, Deutsch was able to achieve a uniformity which could be consciously exploited as an image.

It was an image directed at the New Britain of 'ribbon development, bungaloes with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths, motor-coaches, wireless, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and dirt tracks, swimming pools...' which Priestley discovered in his *English Journey* of 1933.¹² Deutsch's Odeons with their deferential, friendly staff were successful in providing some sort of focus for areas which had developed little sense of community. But this new England, whatever it augured for the future, was not yet extensive enough to support a major cinema circuit. To compete with Gaumont-British and ABC for the best films, Deutsch had to build cinemas in places like Bury, Bolton, Burnley, Halifax, Bradford. The idea that Odeon was building cinemas which attracted patrons until then lost to the cinema began to look less plausible.

There are indications that, by the time the loose congeries of Odeon interests were consolidated into a six million pound public company in July 1937, Deutsch had expanded too rapidly and the financial base of his company was dangerously precarious. Odeon was sufficiently viable and efficiently managed, however, to attract the support of powerful

¹⁰ David Atwell, *Cathedrals of the Movies*, London, the Architectural Press, 1980, p 130.

¹¹ Allen Eyles, 'Oscar and the Odeons', *Focus on Film* no 22, pp 38-58.

¹² J B Priestly, *op cit*, p 375.

¹³ Allen Eyles, 'Union Cinemas', *Focus on Film* no 37, pp 33-43. I have borrowed heavily from Eyles' two useful articles.

¹⁴ *Kinematograph Weekly*, September 23 1937, p 19; December 16 1937, p 3.

financial interests: the merchant bankers, Philip Hill and Partners and the consortium headed by J Arthur Rank which already controlled Pine-wood and Denham studios and C M Woolf's General Film Distributors. Throughout 1938 and 1939 there were reports that Odeon would take over Gaumont-British. The deal may have foundered on Odeon's commitment not to involve itself in film production rather than in Ostrer obduracy, for on Deutsch's death at the end of 1941, Rank was able to buy up both Odeon and Gaumont-British. Before then, in November 1939, Deutsch was able to gain control of the eighteen opulent picture palaces of the Paramount-Astoria circuit.

Odeon and, on a smaller scale, Bernstein's Granada circuit, provide text-book examples of entrepreneurial success in the '30s. The history of the other two new circuits, Union and County, is less happy. County's attempt to launch itself on the Stock Exchange in 1936 was postponed amidst what its Managing Director C J Donada called 'malignant rumours'. Two months later the circuit's 57 cinemas were swallowed up by Odeon. Union, one of the few survivors of the New Issue boom, had, in 1933 begun a programme of expansion as ambitious as that of Oscar Deutsch, though the tactics they employed were rather different.¹³ To supplement the appeal of its films (Gaumont-British and ABC tended to get first choice), Union instituted a policy of 'kine-variety' – the interspersing of live entertainment acts and films. Kine-variety had been popular in the period immediately preceding the coming of sound but except in a handful of cinemas with established reputations – such as the big Bernstein Granadas – it had largely died out. While Odeons tended to be functional and efficiently designed, the Union cinemas, equipped with stages and dressing rooms, were often extravagantly decorated and far too big for the sort of audience they could hope to attract.

David Bernhard who with his son Fred had been the moving spirit behind Union, died suddenly in September 1937. He could not have chosen a less opportune moment. After a series of spectacular flops a slump in film production was under way – Twickenham studio was in the hands of the liquidator and Gaumont-British had shut down their main studio at Shepherds Bush. Elsewhere in the economy, a serious downturn was casting doubt as to the recovery that had seemed to be under way.

After Bernhard's death the parlous state of the company's finances could no longer be concealed. Union shares fell to a low of 7½d and alarmed shareholders invited in John Maxwell, the dour Scot who ran the ABC circuit. Within a month ABC had bought a controlling interest in the company, but not before Maxwell had revealed that Union had a £1.5 million overdraft and that its assets were overvalued by some £2.2 million.¹⁴

The fate of Union and County circuits is a reminder of the fragility of '30s new development. There was undoubtedly a genuine expansion in the entertainment industries, which was in turn dependent upon a general increase in living standards. Between 1913 and 1937 the national per capita income rose by over 23 per cent, and most of that increase occurred during the '30s.¹⁵ However, this had little to do with the increased productivity of British industry and even less with government policy. During the Slump the price of raw materials tumbled dramatically. Britain, with an abnormally small agricultural sector and a very substantial industrial base, found that though the demand for its exports diminished, this was more than balanced by the reduced costs of imports. In contrast to a country like Japan, where the rapid development of industry occurred amidst peasant poverty, Britain could afford relative industrial stagnation while its industrial population lived cheaply on imported foodstuffs.

The expansion of the leisure industries has to be seen in the context of a low-wage economy. Price of admission remained low – the average price of a cinema ticket in 1932 was ninepence – and competition for the customer's pennies was fierce.¹⁶ Throughout the inter-war period cinema exhibitors kept a wary, jealous eye on rival forms of entertainment.

It is generally assumed that the music hall was superseded by the cinema early in the century. Certainly a number of halls were closed or converted into cinemas. But a very much larger number survived as venues for variety. Variety, and its up-market variant revue, was not so very different from what we have been taught to remember as music hall. The old bar-room associations were banished, and the circus acts, the barber shop quartets, the playlets and tableaux and harlequinades died out, but the dancing girls, the song and dance men, the ventriloquists and, above all, the comics continued to attract big audiences. Though they are now remembered as much for their films, it was in variety and the increasingly popular Christmas pantomimes and seaside summer shows that Max Miller, Gracie Fields, Sandy Powell, Duggie Wakefield, Frank Randle, George Formby, Sid Field, Will Fyffe, Will Hay, Tommy Trinder, the Crazy Gang, made their names.

Variety also quickly colonised the radio and there were constant complaints from cinema exhibitors that audiences were staying at home, lost to the cinema because of Lord Reith's irresolute concessions to low-brow taste. But links between the two worlds of film and variety were close, if not always cordial. Gaumont-British had a controlling interest in Moss Empires for much of the '30s and many of the old halls inherited from GTC – including the London Palladium – played variety rather than film. The popularity of variety stars was such that they were frequently provided with cheap film vehicles for their talents, few of which failed to make money despite the contemptuous way in which they were treated. Finally, though live entertainment and the sound film sat uneasily together, exhibitors struggled valiantly to popularise 'kine-variety'.

¹⁵ Peter Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation*, London, Methuen, 1969, p 432.

¹⁶ Simon Rowson, 'British Influence through the Film' (address to the Royal Empire Society, March 20, 1933), pamphlet lodged in BFI Library, p 4.

This strategy of absorbing its rivals worked rather more successfully with the caf  s and dance halls built into many of the prestige cinemas of the '20s and '30s. The low price of food and the abundance of labour encouraged the development of chains of cheap but good quality restaurants like the Lyons Corner Houses. Cinema caf  s, benefiting from the general richness of d  cor and high standard of service characteristic of the big picture palaces, made very effective rivals. Often they would take on a life of their own, their Palm Court orchestras and quiet, deferential atmospheres attracting a middle class clientele seen only rarely in the cinema itself.

Dance halls with their associated noise problems were less common, and however big the cinema it was impossible to incorporate anything as opulent as the Palais de Danse with their acres of cedar-wood floor, their palatial hand-bag depositories and powder rooms with facilities for ironing dresses, their cohorts of professional partners whom one glimpses occasionally as hard-bitten good-time girls and well-oiled gigolos in films of the twenties and thirties. But ballroom dancing maintained a popularity in Britain which turned it into a minor industry, with thousands of dancing schools training new recruits and pushing their favoured pupils towards ever more elaborate competitions. Within this framework the cinema dance halls provided a useful second tier of modern, medium sized halls.

The cinemas' adaptability was remarkable. The Cinema House in Oxford even managed to accommodate the craze for miniature golf by installing a 'Gleneagles Tom Thumb Golf Course' in its basement.¹⁷ But with the Greyhound racing boom of the late '20s there was little exhibitors could do beyond inveighing against the iniquities of gambling, or – as the *Daily Film Renter* advised – making themselves more attractive.¹⁸

Showmanship had been an integral part of cinema since its fairground booth days but in the '20s and '30s campaigns, displays, stunts became increasingly elaborate. In a sort of bizarre fusion of medieval pageantry and twentieth century advertising, campaigns were organised involving street processions, exotically costumed cinema staff, and tie-ins with a variety of goods and services. Film titles such as Leo McCarey's *The Awful Truth* were eagerly seized upon by enterprising cinema managers. In Woking, for example, the local gas company was persuaded to devote an entire window display of refrigerators to help publicise the film, announcing that the housewife who did not keep her food in a modern refrigerator would realise *The Awful Truth* when it went bad.¹⁹ In Hounslow, the makers of Trifle Incarnate beauty aids donated 2,000 samples of powder and several more expensive prizes to those who gave the best answers to the question, 'Ladies tell us *The Awful Truth*, which shade of Trifle Incarnate powder do you use and why?'²⁰

Distributors passed out campaign books full of ideas on how the exhibitor could best arouse interest in the film but a lot depended on local initiative and enthusiasm. For a not very impressive Dorothy Lamour vehicle, *Jungle Princess*, the manager of the New Alexander Cinema, Paisley, hired a four-ton lorry, camouflaged it with imitation

¹⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly*, September 25 1930, p 23.

¹⁸ *Daily Film Renter*, October 25 1927, 'The Kinema and the Dogs'.

¹⁹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, May 19 1938, p 44.

²⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly*, July 28 1938, p 34.

grass and bamboo trees made from cotton bobbins, and sent it off through the streets of Paisley and Glasgow bearing a collection of stuffed animals from the local museum, a man dressed up as a man-eating tiger, and a local thirteen-year-old in a sarong.²¹

The objective of the distribution company was to orchestrate and encourage this local enthusiasm. For Robert Stevenson's *Owd Bob* – a touching tale of true romance among the sheep-farmers of Cumbria – a two-pronged campaign was devised to cash in on both the 'doggie' and the 'non-doggie' angle. That benighted minority who were immune to canine charms were encouraged to ogle Margaret Lockwood and laugh with Will Fyffe. For the dog-lovers a national network of sheepdog trials was organised, with *Owd Bob* cups for the winners. According to James Forsythe, publicity manager for Gaumont-British Distributors: 'In many of our super houses the finals were actually run on the stages. We had imitation green grass, wicker sheep pens, sheep-dogs, shepherds. . . . It was the first time in England that sheep-dog trials had ever been held on stages.'²²

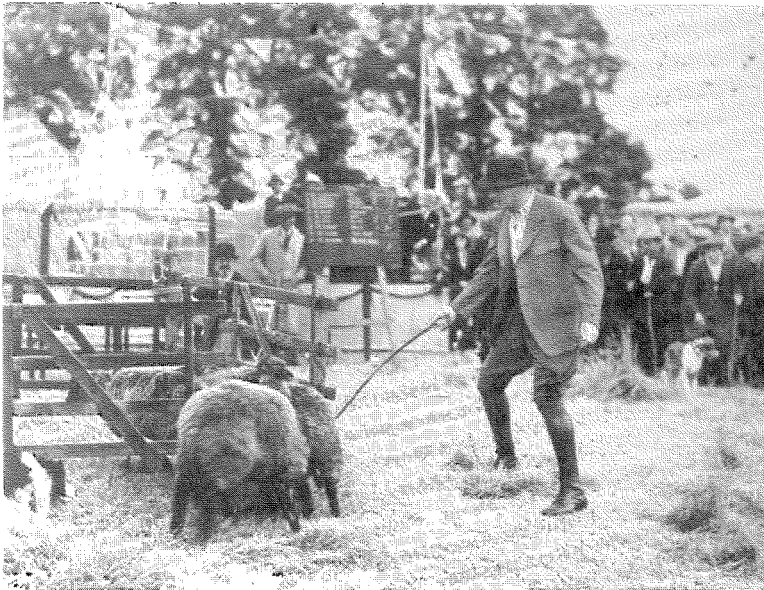
Managers of smaller cinemas had difficulty accommodating sheep, but dog shows were organised in car-parks and, with the assistance of the Tail-Waggers Club, famous local dogs recruited to stand guard in the foyer. In Yeovil an enterprising local exhibitor managed to attract 'Owd Bob' himself, who, in the absence of any sheep, was persuaded to parade six ducks up and down the stage.²³

Inherent in most showmanship was an appeal to what was funny and exotic – men in pyjama-like uniforms and lightweight shackles sent roaming the streets to publicise Will Hay's *Convict 99*; a camel hired to parade through East Ham with a placard announcing 'There's plenty of leg-room at the Granada'. But there was also an appeal to what was stylish

²¹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, May 26 1938, p 44.

²² *Kinematograph Weekly*, January 12 1939, p 58.

²³ *Kinematograph Weekly*, November 3 1938, p 30.



'Owd Bob' in action (bottom left of frame).

²⁴ Harry Hopkins, *The New Look*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1963, p 403.

and fashionable and new—refrigerators, Trifle Incarnate make-up—which reminds us how important the cinema was in setting trends, determining life-styles, in affecting how people spoke, dressed, made love.

The inter-war years saw a huge growth in communal, public entertainment, a process which reached its apogee in the war years when mass conscription imposed communal living on those in the services and the rest of the population was encouraged to huddle together in bomb shelters and cinemas to escape the drab austerity of rationing and the black out. Beneath this though was a stronger trend. People were gathering together in ever greater numbers, but in the anonymity of the crowd they were also struggling towards more private lives.

Nearly a million and a half new homes were built in the '20s, nearly three million in the '30s. Most were privately built for owner-occupiers, though the huge estates at Becontree, Altrincham, Knowle-Bedminster bear testimony to the growing activities of municipal housing authorities. Despite unemployment, the number of people in domestic service continued to fall and the gulf between middle class and upwards-aspiring working class families narrowed as both devoted time and money to establishing their homes as small, cosy, self-contained units. Population rose only slightly in the inter-war period and in spite of a fall in the birth rate. The nuclear family with one or two children became the ideal.

If middle-class housewives lost their prestige as the head of a large domestic organisation and were increasingly expected to minister personally to their husbands' needs, they were spared the drudgery of constant child-bearing and could rely on a range of labour-saving devices to help them run their homes: vacuum cleaners, electric fires, washing machines, refrigerators, came into increasingly common use. The 'industrial revolution in the home' proceeded less rapidly in Britain than in the US and did not reach the majority of working-class households until after the war. But the new suburban estates and even the inner city tenement buildings put up in slum clearance programmes had electric lighting and were free of vermin. One didn't need to escape to the street—or the cinema—to make life bearable.

Harry Hopkins, writing of the decline of the cinema in the '50s, pointed out that, 'The common man had no longer an acute need of one and ninepenceworth of vicarious luxury. With the aid of his new house, his car, the HP, his wife's magazines, and his do-it-yourself kit, he could build an only slightly less colourful, and much more satisfying, world for himself at home.'²⁴ Exhibitors did indeed complain about the disappointing turnout in the new suburban areas, but as Oscar Deutsch was shrewd enough to realise, the cinema could provide a much needed communal focus and a welcome break in the isolation of this new, private existence. And for those millions of working class people still stuck in overcrowded, sub-standard housing, the cinema offered an escape, not only into vicarious luxury, but into relatively undisturbed privacy.

REPRESENTING THE NATION: BRITISH DOCUMENTARY FILM, 1930-45

21

BY ROBERT COLLS AND PHILIP DODD

BRITISH DOCUMENTARY FILMS represent the nation in two ways. They are said to be Britain's contribution to the cinema; and they represent 'us' to ourselves and to others. Of course, such common-sense masks more than it reveals. Who are 'we'? Who is representing whom? What is the inscribed audience for such representations? What are the dominant representations of the nation? Are there oppositional ones?

It would be impossible in an article of this length to discuss in all its ramifications the relationship between these questions and the documentary film movement. What we do falls into two parts. First we establish the political provenance of the thinking about the national culture which rules the dominant documentary practice in the 1920s and '30s; and second, examine one 'documentary' film, *Fires Were Started* (directed by Humphrey Jennings, 1943) in the light of the preceding analysis. Produced at a moment when the obligation to construct a national identity was most severe and working within and *against* the dominant documentary practice, *Fires* reveals what resistance to 'nationalisation' and its attendant film practice might involve.

For our argument about the dominant tradition, we want to refer to a number of films and to John Grierson's writings. What we would maintain is not simply Grierson's importance to the movement, but the centrality of the writings themselves, as much conscious interventions into current arguments about the State, Nation and Film as the films he produced.

The most cursory glance through the 1946 collection of essays, *Grierson on Documentary*¹, reveals John Grierson's concern with the construction of a national culture. Dominating the volume are ideas of 'citizenship', 'national education', 'the corporate nature of community life', and their centrality to any serious thinking about film. So what is

¹Forsyth Hardy (ed),
*Grierson on
Documentary*,
London, Collins,
1946, pp 16, 140,
126. Subsequent page
references will be
given in the text.

²Stuart Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing "the Popular"', in Raphael Samuel (ed), *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, pp 229-230. See also Gareth Stedman-Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

³Quoted in Stephen Yeo, 'Socialism, the State and Some Oppositional Englishness', in Philip Dodd and Robert Colls (ed), *The Idea of Englishness, 1880-1920*, London, Croom Helm, forthcoming. On collectivism, see WH Greenleaf, *The Rise of Collectivism*, London Methuen, 1983.

⁴Peter Keating (ed), *Into Unknown England: Selections from the Social Explorers*, London, Fontana, 1976, p 10.

⁵Raymond Williams, 'British Film History: New Perspectives', in James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds), *British Cinema History*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983, p 17.

the political provenance of Grierson's vocabulary? Like the man himself (b1898), it should be located in the period 1880-1920, the years of a massive reconstruction of capital, the rise of collectivisms, and the formation of a new kind of 'educative' state: the period in which, in Stuart Hall's words, 'lies the matrix of factors and problems from which our history – and our peculiar dilemmas arise'². Grierson's celebration of citizenship, his sense of 'the impossibility of pursuing the old liberal individualist and rational theory', and belief that 'the great days of unmitigated individualism and governmental *laissez-faire* are over, and the day of common unified planning has arrived', echoes the early twentieth century collectivists who, conscious of the bankruptcy of an ideology of *laissez-faire*, offered the State as the neutral site for resolving class conflict (pp124, 193).

Note the similarity between Grierson's vocabulary above and that of the collectivist Sydney Webb:

*... if our aim is the transformation of England into a Social Democracy we must frankly accept the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution ... the subordination of the worker to the citizen, of the individual to the community. We must rid ourselves resolutely of all these schemes and projects of bygone socialisms which have now passed out of date.*³

Indeed Webb's relegation of other socialisms to the realm of the unmodernised past is paralleled by Grierson's argument that the 'socialist dreams of workers' control in a classless society' represents an 'unpractical and inefficient [ideal]' (p 197). If the continuity between the dominant documentary film tradition and the early twentieth century collectivists was solely a matter of a shared political vocabulary it would still be worthy of note, given our conviction that the specific processes of film must be seen in relation to a more general history. But the relation is much more substantial. Within a history of film the British documentary movement begins in, say, 1928 with *Drifters*; with an awareness of a wider cultural history, the grammar and concerns of the movement can be traced back to the 'Into Unknown England' writing of the late nineteenth century in which the older tradition of personal exploration blended 'into the newer techniques of sociological analysis'.⁴ We are with Raymond Williams in his recent argument that there are 'really very few films, by proportion, for which there is not a nineteenth century precedent in drama or entertainment'⁵ (and, we would add, social reporting).

Like the documentary film – which Grierson tells us initially meant travelogue – such writing involves our travelling into a world unknown to us. The titles and subjects of some of the works might be those of documentary film: consider Lady Bell's *At the Works* (1907), a study of iron foundry workers in Middlesbrough, or Stephen Reynold's *A Poor Man's House* (1909), or George R Sims *How the Poor Live* (1883). Like the documentarists (documentary is itself a nineteenth-century word), such writers were convinced of the need to bring the two classes into one

nation, and of the need for the State to regulate social life. Grierson would even go so far as to claim that films such as *Housing Problems* (directed by Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton, 1935) had hoped to avert revolution, a 'bloodier solution' (p 181). The continuity between these two groups of travellers is evident: George Sims in *How the Poor Live* writes of the need to travel 'into a dark continent that is within easy walking distance of the General Post Office', and Grierson of his desire to 'travel dangerously into the jungles of Middlesborough and the Clyde'.⁶ Their intentions are similar: if the writers discovered that the working class had a culture of their own, so the film-makers wished to discover 'tales of fine craftsmanship...tucked away in the Black Country' (p 56) or to map the leisure of that class (e.g. Jennings' *Spare Time*, 1939).

The inscribed audience of both groups has to be led into this unknown world. In *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, Andrew Mearns addresses his own class thus: 'Few who read mere pages have any conception. . . . To get into [the rookeries] you have to penetrate courts. . . .'⁷ In Anstey and Elton's *Housing Problems*, what are reductively called establishing shots, an aesthetic convention which like all such conventions inscribes variable social meaning, move the viewer *into* the slums from outside. The opening sequence of cuts is as follows (the voice-over is of a councillor introducing the area and its 'problems'): high distant shot of slum area; pan on high from left to right of the building of new flats; mid long shot of back of slums; pan right to left of roofs; eye level shot from *within* alley. The next five shots move us slowly and inexorably into a yard; three shots later we are inside one of the houses. We have arrived. It may be that the film-makers' actual audience was more heterogeneous than that of the earlier explorers, but there is no mistaking Grierson's pride in his (middle-class) audience's response to *Industrial Britain* (1933) or the continuity between that response and the one desired by the earlier writers: 'the workers' portraits of *Industrial Britain* were cheered in the West End of London. The strange fact was that the West End had never seen workmen's portraits before – certainly not on the screen' (p 139).

The film-makers' dominant stance, like that of the writers', can be summed up by one word, 'conscience': the preciousness of *Housing Problems* is that it 'touches the conscience' (p 149). An invention of the late nineteenth-century, 'social conscience', not to be confused with solidarity or affiliation, involves, according to Raymond Williams, 'a persistent sense of a quite clear line between an upper and a lower class. . . . it is a matter of social conscience to go on explaining and proposing at official levels, and at the same time to help in organising and educating the victims.'⁸ 'Explaining and proposing', 'organising and educating' – could there be a better description of a large part of Grierson's programme, and of his writing which is addressed to one class about the 'problem' of another? 'Film can really bring the outside world alive to the growing citizen. . . . It really can serve an interpretative function . . . it can, if it is mastered and organised provide this necessary umbilical to the community outside' (p 127).

⁶Quoted in Peter Keating, op cit, p 14. Grierson, quoted in Stuart Hood, 'The Documentary Film Movement' in James Curran and Vincent Porter, op cit, p 107.

⁷On the distinction between 'inscribed' and 'actual' viewers, see Dave Morley, 'Texts, Readers, Subjects', in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, Paul Willis (eds), *Culture, Media, Language*, London, Hutchinson, 1980, pp 163-173. Mearns is quoted in Peter Keating, op cit, p 15.

⁸Raymond Williams, 'The Bloomsbury Faction', in *Problems of Materialism and Culture*, London, Verso, 1980, p 155.

⁹George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (originally published 1937) Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1962, p 104.

¹⁰ Edgar Anstey quoted in Stuart Hood, 'The Documentary Film Movement' in Curran and Porter (eds), op cit, p 107.

¹¹ Allan Ross, *Colours of War: War Art 1939-45*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1983, pp 44-45.

And how is the class who is looked at viewed? Certainly it is true that one of the roles allotted to that class is, to use Williams' phrase, 'victim'. Anstey and Elton's *Housing Problems*, already referred to, offers a sequence of slum dwellers who, after being introduced to us through commentary, speak direct to camera, responding to an unseen interrogator (Mr Bruner: 'a lot of people don't understand what it's like living in one room'). We are never given in visual terms the point of view of any of the occupiers; the camera keeps a discreet distance and in the most simple sense looks and allows its audience to look at these people. What the film shows is that these people need our help and that we have nothing to fear if we provide them with better homes. One further matter should be noted: the film's preference for the occupiers to address us from around the fire or by the mantelpiece. This preference is at one with Orwell's 1937 celebration of working-class interiors, 'when the fire glows in the open range... when Father in shirt sleeves, sits in the rocking chair... and Mother sits on the other with her sewing'.⁹ There is a strain of English thinking on the 'poor' which stretches to Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy*, which is happiest *chez* working-class.

But working class as victim is less prominent in documentary film than working class as working hero. In films such as *Coalface* (1935) and *Industrial Britain* (1933) the concentration on the male at work is cause and effect of the determination to see 'the working man... as a heroic figure'¹⁰, to celebrate 'the ardour and bravery of common labour' (p 86). The male body becomes the focus of this celebration, seen at its simplest in the countless close-ups of the male body at work. For example, in *Coalface*, a film in which the human being is so often displaced by the machinery to the margins of the frame, the only sustained close-ups are of semi-naked miners. Such celebration may also help to explain the (very common) preference for dusk/dawn shots in which the worker's individuality is effaced and he is seen – like the machinery he serves – as shape.

There are also moments within a number of films when the male body absorbs attention without regard to its function. Consider that sequence in *Coalface* of two miners eating their snap. After a few shots which establish their presence against the visible coal seam, and via a shot of one of the men's sandwiches, a shot of a different order is produced. The coal seam has disappeared and foregrounded on the left of the frame in the blackness – lit and shot from above – is a radiant face and body of a miner; on the right hand side is a muscular arm around which is wrapped a large hand. In a film of rapid cutting, this shot, absorbed in the male body, is held for some time. One might understand some of the significance of such a sequence by a quotation from Graham Sutherland, a commissioned Second World War artist, who painted miners. Uninterested in his own 'small and naturalistic' drawings of miners' heads, the deeper significance of the miners to him was that 'they were a kind of different species – ennobled underground, and with an added *stature* which, above ground, they lacked.'¹¹

Beatrix Campbell's recent attack in *Wigan Pier Revisited* on Orwell's

1937 celebration of the miners' 'most noble bodies; wide shoulders... and small pronounced buttocks, with not an ounce of waste flesh anywhere' accurately describes the dominant documentary tradition's treatment of the bodies of manual workers:

*miners are victims and heroes at the same time... they command both protection and admiration. They are represented as beautiful statuesque shaded men. The miner's body is loved in the literature of men because of its work and because it works.*¹²

¹² Beatrix Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited: Poverty and Politics in the Eighties*, London, Virago, 1984, pp 97-98.

What Campbell's attack on 'male narcissism' neglects is the class dimension of such representations – these are representations of the men of one class by the men of another – and of their ideological significance. Concentration on the splendour of male working-class bodies (a simple complement to a matching obsession with their animality) fixes such men's concerns and competence and ratifies the distinction between mental and manual labour. As is clear, representation of 'real' masculinity is inseparable from representation of the male working class, and the 'real' working class is male. Working-class women are simply read out of the picture or 'left' at home (e.g. *Housing Problems* or *North Sea*).

The first part of our argument is, then, that there is an idea of the nation inscribed in documentary film practice: that the representation of a severely limited male working class with certain necessary functions entails an understanding of the relationship between the classes and of the place of the working class within a potential and desirable national community. It is within and against the conventions set out above that the documentary films of the Second World War worked.

What is striking is the continuity. The contours of what we have mapped can be seen in three early World War II films. First, consider the class space from which the films are made. In *First Days* (1939), Alberto Cavalcanti juxtaposes the experiences of the various parts of London, relying upon the commentary ('twenty years of peace and building have been overthrown [by the war]') and concluding shots of Buckingham Palace and the Queen to do what the visual rhetoric of the film cannot do, fuse the experiences of the classes into one experience. The apparent simple juxtaposition of suburban/West End/East End/Buckingham Palace should not lead us to assume that none of the spaces is privileged. The East End, represented in a sequence of shots of sandbags, public shelters, anonymous workers and docks (the delapidated houses described in *The People's War* are noticeably absent) are viewed from the West End. Note, for example, the commentary which, taking us from the West End, begins its tour by saying – like someone from a late nineteenth-century report – 'Any Londoner wandering around the East End world...' and ends with 'Back in the West End'. 'We' still look at 'them'. Or take the matter of the qualities of the working class. In *Welfare of the Workers* (1941) the very title indicating the film's stance, the broadcasters within the film, the Minister of Labour and the film's

¹³ Mick Eaton, 'In the Land of the Good Image', *Screen* May-June 1982, vol 23 no 1, pp 83-84: '... the diversity of sounds and images can no longer, in 1945, construct an unproblematic offscreen "Britain" outside of class contradictions for an imminent peace-time economy.'

¹⁴ For Jennings the filmic 'poet' of ordinary people see Ernest Betts, *The Film Business*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1973, p 187; Ivan Butler, *The War Film*, New Jersey, Tantivy Press, 1974, p 62; and Erik Barnouw, *Documentary. A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1974, p 146; Lindsay Anderson, 'Only Connect. Some Aspects of the Work of Humphrey Jennings', *Sight and Sound*, April-June 1954. By contrast, see A J P Taylor's remark that there were 'no war poets': *English History 1914-1915*, Pelican, 1975, p 666.

¹⁵ For a new Englishness and a new social plan after the war years, identified with the Labour Party, see A J P Taylor, op cit, p 727; K O Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945-1951*, Oxford, OUP, 1984, p 44.

¹⁶ For an early (1942) and official representation of the 'national-collectivist myth' brought alive by war and hardship see A D K Owen, 'Citizen of Britain', in Major R L

commentator, all urge the mute and serious workers to 'go to it'. Rather than the agency, power and intelligence of the class, their need for welfare is what is insinuated. The continuity with, say, *Housing Problems* is clear. And finally, consider the place of the class within the national culture and national history. Take three shots from the National Gallery sequence of *Listen to Britain* (directed by Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAllister, 1941). Accompanied by Myra Hess's playing, the camera with its persistent high angle—there are very few eye-level shots in the film—produces a long shot of Nelson's column through a cluster of buildings, cuts quickly to a midshot of column and statue, and then to an actual sailor gazing out from a terrace on to Trafalgar Square, that site of imperial celebration. These three shots—and the rapidity of cutting suggests a rhetoric of associationism—fix the anonymous sailor. Not only has he a place within the current war effort (which is being waged to save the national heritage), but he is caught and celebrated in the monument to his forebears' leader, Nelson, the defender of the nation (of course, *Listen to Britain* is another such 'monument').

If films like these could be said to work predominantly within the documentary conventions of the period, there are others which worked against those conventions to a greater degree. Central to such a project is the work of Humphrey Jennings, writer, photographer, painter and one of several of the British documentary film-makers of this period closely associated with the Surrealist movement. For this reason, we have chosen to examine one of his films in some detail. We would argue that what Mick Eaton terms 'the impossibility of national unity'¹³ apparent in *Diary for Timothy* (1944-45) is already visible by 1943 in *Fires Were Started*.

Humphrey Jennings has been considered a major figure in the development of the documentary tradition by combining a 'social conscience' with a 'People's War' to throw the tradition forward in a continuous span which first registers, and then fuses its preoccupation with class and nation.¹⁴ From the nationalist achievements of the people's war it is but a short step to the collectivist celebrations of the people's peace: from Dunkirk to Beveridge to VE Day to Labour to the ordinary human decencies of a Welfare State, Jennings' work has been privileged in the making of a new kind of Englishness.¹⁵ We shall call this the 'national-collectivist myth'.¹⁶ Our concern here is to show how *Fires Were Started* challenges this myth by working both within and against the documentary tradition.

However, it is necessary to begin by saying that although it is our contention that *Fires Were Started* is a unique and challenging work, even this film can be read as contributing to the range of national-collectivist myth. Made in 1942 and distributed in 1943—but about a day in the life of an Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) station in the London Blitz of 1940-41—*Fires* is in remarkable accord with the Ministry of Information's 'Official Story' of Civil Defence, *Front Line*¹⁷. The accord lies not only in the details of fire-fighting—that warehouse fires were particularly difficult, that water supplies and brigade coordination was

crucial, that Londoners did 'take it' without mass panic, that the neighbourhood was the unit of loyalty and defence, even that working-class cultural cohesion was an effective weapon – the accord lies also in the visual presentation of the fighting, in the tired faces, in the struggling on the branch of a hose, in the power of turntable ladders, in the wasteland of street debris.¹⁸ Similarly, in its silences *Fires* can be read as feeding the national-collectivist myth. The film does not address less comforting aspects of the Blitz. There is no reference to class differences between the East and West Ends in the toll of death and destruction, no examples of popular anger at central government blunders or local government ineptitude, no hint of cynical or selfish attitudes, no mention of official prejudices about popular morale, no showing of official incompetence or inadequacy, no trace of delinquent or criminal behaviour, in particular looting. It is in this light that Angus Calder could describe *Fires* as one of a number of 'straightforward official documentaries of distinction' – documentary realism conscripted in the service of the nation.¹⁹

In April 1942 Jennings was hard at work with the Crown Film Unit in the Stepney-Wapping district shooting *Fires Were Started*. In a letter to Cicely Jennings he declared that he was 'really beginning to understand people and making friends with them and not just looking at them and lecturing or pitying them'.²⁰ These offhand remarks hint at a contradictory position which manifests itself in the two narratives at work in *Fires*. The first we may call, for purposes of analysis, the 'official' Ministry of Information narrative, working within the dominant conventions of the documentary tradition; the second we may call the 'unofficial' narrative, working against collectivist nationhood by challenging the dominant conventions.

The official narrative can be regarded as in line with myths both national and collectivist. Here, we are 'just looking at them'. Adopting the dominant documentary practices of rapid cutting, the anonymity of the workers, and the emphasis on the apparatus of national work, including uniforms, we are informed how the fire-fighting operation works. The AFS comprises the labour of part-timers and full-timers, from fire chiefs to tea 'girls', who are properly trained under discipline and who fight the fires through a communicative hierarchy which flows through telephone switchboards from sub-station to Fire Control to Brigade and back again. The Service functions and its narrative wastes no time in surveying it.

In contrast, the unofficial narrative engages in slower build-ups of character, friendships, local loyalties, and 'off-duty' routines. The emphasis is not so much on function as culture. Consider a sequence where the two narratives collide: a long sequence of singing and self mockery ('One men went to mow . . .') whose changes in point-of-view put us by turns with mockers and mocked alike, is interrupted by a series of brief cuts to the skies, dark streets, a quiet river, anti-aircraft guns – anonymous persons at dusk, a personified 'London' awaiting the attack. Or consider the final three sequences: here the narrative dwells on the firemen back from their work and out of uniform. Saddened by the death

Marshall (ed), *The British Way and Purpose*, Directorate of Army Education, 1944, p 17.

¹⁷ Ministry of Information, *Front Line 1940-41. The Official Story of the Civil Defence in Britain*, HMSO, 1942.

¹⁸ *Front Line's* exemplary socialist council of 'Thamesborough' sounds like Poplar: Constantine Fitzgibbon, *The Blitz*, London, Macdonald, 1970, pp 63-64.

¹⁹ Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945*, London Panther, 1969, p 425.

²⁰ Mary-Lou Jennings (ed), *Humphrey Jennings: Film-Maker, Painter, Poet*, London, BFI, 1982, p 31.

of a comrade, 'Jacko', they drink tea and muse on the night's events. Individual reactions are conveyed by medium and close-up shots of the men, on the face of it not doing very much. Suddenly, one of them, very close-up, calls 'Snap out!' and the narrative shifts. A bugle calls and a crescendo of cuts follows: the ammunition ship they have saved; a local landmark (church clock); the military funeral of Jacko; blossoming trees. The final shot shows the ship cutting through waves as a band plays. This return to the official narrative is signalled by rapid cutting, rousing music and a minimum of dialogue.



London personified: the face of a fire-fighter.

It is the official *Fires* which is closest to the national-collectivist myth of a class serving its function and going about its war with the minimum of fuss. Jennings' *Listen to Britain* has the official commentary of its Canadian introducer and the Voice of the BBC, but the people demonstrate their organicism by talking *sotto voce* or not at all. 'Natural' sounds are now national sounds: lark, Spitfire, industry, Blackpool. By contrast, the unofficial narrative of *Fires* represents the faces and voices²¹ of the men who fight the fire. Improvisation, non-professional actors, dialogue in dialect, and bar-room instrumentation convey a sense of localism worth comparing with the images of class and nation rendered in Jennings' *The Silent Village* (1943). Here the nation is Welsh and their language is public. A number of establishing shots construct a solemn working class and a dignified nation organised in band and choir and meeting. We are back to looking at the documentarists looking at the

²¹ Compare with A C Ward, *A Literary Journey through Wartime Britain*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1943: 'The common people in modern England are no lovers of great words. They make their challenge to the enemy in homelier ways...', p. 13.



Group singing in *The Silent Village*.

class's most unproblematic cultural habits, kept deliberately at a respectful distance.

Within the dominant documentary practice, including the traditions of social reportage, environment is overwhelming. The grand design of the establishing shots is to fasten the people in their place. That place, say slum or coalmine, determines the people's role as either victims or heroes. But there is no attempt in *Fires* to subordinate people to place, or culture to function. The London we see is ordinary and local rather than imposing or metropolitan. Even in the fire scenes, the film resists the injunction for the official war artists to get 'to the scenes of devastation before the clearance and salvage workers had a chance to spoil the aesthetic effect'.²² Indeed, *Fires Were Started* was criticised in the British Film Institute's *Monthly Film Bulletin* for just this failure to present an aesthetically overwhelming London: 'fails to exploit the dramatic fury of acre upon acre of raging flames . . .'.²³

How we are introduced to the firemen and their place repays closer attention. In close-ups the men are allowed cheery 'good morning's' by nick-name and banter only after the official narrative has introduced us to them by the names and initials of an anonymous station roster. We get to know them from their point of view through Barrett, the middle-class 'writer', who has joined them on his first day. Against the documentary tradition, we do not arrive at the station with Barrett, but rather see his arrival in the yard from the firemen's point of view. After that there is rarely a camera shot in the unofficial narrative which could not be from the standpoint of a member of the group: we see most people eye-level. The major exception to this is the impassive bravery of 'Jacko', surveyed

²² Meirion and Susie Harries, *The War Artists. British Official War Art of the Twentieth Century*, London, Michael Joseph, 1983, p. 186.

²³ *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 30, 1943.



'Jacko' on the warehouse.

from above and below on the warehouse while the fire burns around him.

It should be said that the unofficial *Fires* represents mainly the activities of working-class males. Women are consigned to official duties which they carry out with ability, but rarely enter the unofficial narrative. They are not part of the represented culture; they perform the functions of the State. While they 'unite' the official nation from the inside, through maps and telephone lines, the men are outside, among



Women relegated to official duties.

the real nation, doing the real work. Nevertheless, although men are privileged, it is worth noting that the unofficial narrative resists any cultural disposition to wrap these men of a different class in an environment of social victims or undress them in a workplace of physical heroes. There is no gleaming of vicarious pleasure from the gleaming muscles of male workers. Their conversations, physiques, relationships and practices are ordinary and at times border on burlesque: the 'One man went to mow' sequence has them mocking their own physical awkwardness in gumboots and waders; two men partner each other like Morris-dancing monkeys. Faces, unlike bodies, tend to be personal rather than anonymous – valorised as individual rather than male. It could be that Jennings' work with Mass Observation has alerted him to the counterfeit nature of a working-class seen as either social victim, or its obverse, physical hero. Instead, there was evidence to suggest an independent culture distinctively ironic about male physicality and sexuality.²⁴



Men at play: 'One man went to mow'.

The place that the sub-station defends is a local place. This is not an England of flowers and fields, nor even the dramatic valley landscape of a mining village, but the dense, flat, urban brickwork of working-class London. The imperial city of other wartime films, or of Churchillian rhetoric, is never glimpsed. Out of their homes, streets, markets, shops and docks the men come to work. Barrett is lost in this place; he asks an Asian the way; he has to be shown the territory by Daniels, in uniform but unbelted and clearly relaxed in his 'manor'. This emphatic representation of locality suggests a sense of cultural knowledge as a resource (fireman from outside lose their way and the blaze is ultimately quelled by water from a sunken barge known only to the local men).²⁵ Back at

²⁴ Tom Harrison and Charles Madge, *Mass Observation. Britain*, Penguin, 1939, chapters four and five.

²⁵ For left-wing and right-wing 'ruralism', and the neglect of the urban, Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Algate, *Best of British Cinema and Society 1930-1970*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983, pp 46-54; Martin Gilbert, *Winston S Churchill. Finest Hour 1939-1941*, London, Heinemann, 1983, pp 778-779. See Paul Willis, 'Shop-Floor Culture, Masculinity and the Wage Form', in John Clarke *et al* (eds), *Working-Class Culture*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.

²⁶ The Ministry of Information refused to support *Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (Powell and Pressburger, 1943) and Churchill wanted it stopped: Richards and Aldgate, op cit, pp 64-65.

²⁷ David Bradby and John McCormick, *People's Theatre*, London, Croom Helm, 1978, pp 98-100.

²⁸ Robert Hewison, *Under Siege. Literary Life in London 1939-45*, London, Quartet, 1979, pp 37-39, 49, 55.

²⁹ Tom Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz*, London, Collins, 1976, p 85. Stephen Spender found that good relationships in the fire station depended upon conscious and deliberate myth-making: *Citizens in War - and After*, London, Harrap, 1945, p 98.

³⁰ Stephen Spender, op cit, p 15, 31.

Brigade Control, the Fire Chief, shot from a low angle, bears a resemblance to Colonel Blimp, but if there is a political implication, it is muted.²⁶ The middle-class voices and gestures of authority are appropriate to the official narrative, but when shown alongside the 'naturalism' of the unofficial narrative they appear stilted and apart. There is a political effect here but the didacticism of a Unity Theatre is wholly absent.²⁷ There is no lecturing; only the implicit politics of a culture in action which is articulated by the different narratives. Not that the men are perfect—they are a 'crazy gang' not wholly reconciled to Sub's issue of three pairs of trousers to their one—but when galvanised they are the defenders and makers of a particular place in England, not the subjects of a nation state.

In July 1941 Churchill had declared the first phase of the war over. Blitz myth-making had started in the middle of the bombings, and by April of 1942, the year of *Fires*' production, an article in the *New Statesman* could declare that it had 'worked itself out long ago'.²⁸ The year of the film's distribution, 1943, was a much more optimistic time. There were victories to celebrate, the Manpower Boards were affirming the value of labour, the government was at last committed to full employment. Yet the 'Fires' of the official narrative are clearly Blitz fires. They look back. They represent the Crown Film Unit at work on national morale—reminding the nation of how it acquitted itself. The 'Fires' of the unofficial narrative, by contrast, are human fires which have *started* and not been extinguished. They look forward. In the opening sequence the camera pans right to left across a blazing fire. The closing scene shows the ammunition ship moving down-river, forwards, from left to right. It is moving onwards and is able to do so by the actions of the night before. The question of the unofficial narrative as maker of myths is not difficult to answer. As we have seen, it does not eschew myth, but presents new ones which build on the old to show the potential agency of working-class culture.

Mass Observation discovered the capacity of the blitzed for rapid, almost instantaneous, myth-making.²⁹ In 1945 Stephen Spender, himself a war fireman, emphasised the positive qualities of these myths for a new social order based upon the local, democratic, voluntary, achievements of Civil Defence.³⁰ *Fires Were Started* represents the nation, but the 'nation' is perceived as what it could be rather than what it was. The unofficial narrative rejects wartime conventions of a united people and an integrated culture. Its people are working-class people with their own culture, a culture resourceful enough to make them defenders and makers, not social victims or individual heroes. However, the place they defend and make is not 'country' but 'locality'.

But the *official* narrative remains. It is not deconstructed or debunked. In fact the firemen are *enabled* by a wider Service of communication and technical support. The mechanical power of the turntable apparatus is given close attention. It comes from outside resources, and its function is necessary. There is a structural tension between the two narratives just as there is a structural tension between the firemen and the AFS,

between small group, voluntarist, 'democratic' activities and their wider relationship to other groups, other voluntarisms, and other activities.

Fires Were Started is a tale of two narratives. There is tension between them but it is an exploratory tension, seeking out new relationships between the agency of the working-class and the state and civil society with which it lives. There can be no resolution of narrative tensions because they are in search of a new way. Far from the dominant documentary practice of resolving nation and class through collectivism, *Fires Were Started* explores the possibilities of a new socialism beyond the bombed fragments.

When the Blitz first came to Britain its fires were fought by brigades of regular and auxiliary firemen, each independent of the rest, though linked by reinforcement.

(Opening titles of *Fires Were Started*)



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THE BRITISH 'SOCIAL PROBLEM' FILM: 'VIOLENT PLAYGROUND' AND 'SAPPHIRE'

BY JOHN HILL

¹ Quoted *Daily Express*, October 10, 1958.

² 'My Idea of Freedom', *Films and Filming*, September 1961, p. 24. John Grierson's remark that 'the British documentary group began not so much in affection for film per se as in affection for national education' can be found in Forsyth Hardy (ed), *Grierson on Documentary*, London, Collins, 1946, p. 140.

³ See *Sunday Express*, April 6, 1958.

⁴ See, for example, Colin McArthur, 'Crossfire and the Anglo-American Critical Tradition', *Film Form*, vol. 1 no. 2, Autumn 1977. On the influence of the documentary movement, in this respect, see Alan Lovell and Jim Hillier, *Studies in Documentary*, Chapter 1, London, Secker and Warburg, 1972.

IN 1959, the British Film Academy voted *Sapphire* the 'Best British Film' of the year. As with most awards, it is difficult to be sure of the criteria which have been applied in reaching such a judgement, but, in the case of *Sapphire*, it should be possible to make an educated guess. *Sapphire* was one of a group of 'social problem' pictures enjoying a prominence in the British cinema of the '50s. In particular, it was one of a series of such films to have been made by producer Michael Relph and director Basil Dearden. *Frieda* (1947) had dealt with anti-German feeling, *The Gentle Gunman* (1952) with Irish nationalism, *The Blue Lamp* (1950), *I Believe In You* (1952), and *Violent Playground* (1958) with juvenile delinquency. *Victim* (1961), dealing with homosexuality, and *Life for Ruth* (1962), dealing with religious fundamentalism, were to follow. What appeared to distinguish these 'social problem' films, and win them critical praise (such as the BFA award), was their determination, not just to provide 'mere entertainment', but confront 'real' situations and 'important' social issues, and, in so doing, make a positive contribution to the 'good' of society. A spokesman for Rank, the distributors of *Sapphire*, explained his belief in the cinema's 'tremendous influence' and the value of the film in promoting understanding of 'the problem' of race.¹ Michael Relph himself, echoing John Grierson's sentiments on the privileged role of documentary in the provision of 'national education', argued that because the cinema was 'genuinely a mass medium' so it also had 'social and educative responsibilities as well as artistic ones'.² A good example of such assumptions being put into practice was provided by *Violent Playground*: 40 boys on probation were taken along to see the film as a 'lesson on the futility of juvenile delinquency'.³

But what such formulations tend to assume, rather than argue, is both the positive social worth of such films and the unproblematic nature of the messages which they produce. What a film is about and what effect it will have (say, on 40 probationers) is presumed to be transparent, uncomplicated by the aesthetic conventions which such films employ.

Our 40 probationers are not so much watching a film as a series of events which might just as well be happening further down the street. As has often been noted, it is precisely this confinement of the aesthetic to the residual, the assumption that formal devices are no more than the neutral transmitters of meanings, which has consistently bedevilled so much of Anglo-American criticism.⁴ By addressing the conception of a 'social problem', in general, and the aesthetic characteristics of the 'social problem' film, in particular, so I would hope to suggest one alternative to this traditional means of conceptualising both the nature and merits of the British 'social problem' picture.⁵

The Social Problem Discourse

It has now become something of a commonplace for sociologists of deviance to argue that social problems as such do not exist.⁶ This is not, of course, to deny that there is any such thing as juvenile crime but that there is nothing in the phenomenon itself which necessarily makes it a 'social problem'. For it to become so, it has to be defined or labelled as such. That is to say, a social problem is the product of discourse rather than the property of any particular condition in itself. What then becomes accepted as a social problem is not in any way inevitable but a consequence of the ability to have any particular definition legitimated, be it via the media, or other 'accredited agencies', such as the church, or through a mobilisation of the legal process, as in the case of the 1959 Street Offences Act which resulted from the 'moral panic' over the perceived 'social problem' of prostitution⁷. To this extent, the 'social problems' so defined are not so much the problems of 'society' as a whole as the 'problems' of those who enjoy the ability to universalise their particular point of view as the point of view of all in society. As such, the successful definition of a 'social problem' not only presupposes but also entails power. As Stephen Lukes suggests, power is to be understood not merely as an ability to secure desired (but possibly contested) ends; it is a 'socially structured and culturally patterned' phenomenon, relying both on selection (the ability to 'set the agenda') and suppression (the denial of the definitions and interests of others).⁸ 'It is in this way that we can see how discursive rules are linked to the exercise of power; how the forms of discourse are both constituted by, and ensure the reproduction of, the social system, through forms of selection, exclusion and domination.'⁹

This is also so of the form which the conception of a 'social problem' assumes. Implicit in the logic of the designation of a problem is the idea of its solution. In effect, the definition of a 'social problem' presumes an ability to resolve it within the parameters of the social system: it does not imply structural change or social transformation.¹⁰ Thus, the 'problem' of poverty implies a tinkering with living standards, not the transformation of a social structure whose constitutive principle is that of inequality. In a similar fashion, the conception of a 'social problem' tends to suggest its discreteness, or isolation, from more general social relations. The 'problem' of juvenile delinquency, for example, is defined

⁵ The traditional approach to the 'social problem' film is also challenged by Richard Dyer, 'Victim: Hermeneutic Project', *Film Form*, vol 1, no 2, Autumn 1977 and Andy Medhurst, 'Victim: Text as Context', *Screen*, July-October 1984, vol 25 nos 4-5, pp 22-35.

⁶ For a basic statement of such an approach, see Howard Becker (ed), *Social Problems: A Modern Approach*, Introduction, New York, John Wiley and Son, 1966.

⁷ For a fuller discussion, see Carol Smart, 'Law and the Control of Women's Sexuality: The Case of the 1950s', in Bridget Hutter and Gillian Williams (eds), *Controlling Women: The Normal and the Deviant*, London, Croom Helm, 1981.

⁸ Stephen Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, London, Macmillan, 1974, p 22.

⁹ Robert Young, 'Introduction to Michel Foucault', 'The Order of Discourse' in R Young (ed), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, p 48.

¹⁰ This would also pre-empt a definition of social problems as 'contradictory' ie the effect of 'an opposition or disjunction of structural principles of social systems where those

principles operate in terms of each other but at the same time contravene one another' (Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, London, Macmillan, 1979, p 141). As Larrain suggests 'the concealment of contradictions' is one of the central operations of ideology (see *The Concept of Ideology*, London, Hutchinson, 1979).

¹¹ See Stephen Neale, *Genre*, London, British Film Institute, 1980, p 48; also see the difficulties produced by Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy's attempt to define the Hollywood social problem as a special genre in *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair and Politics from the Fifties*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981, p 8.

¹² Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1978, p 48.

¹³ Russell Campbell, 'The Ideology of the Social Consciousness Movie: Three Films by Darryl F Zanuck', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Winter 1978, vol 3 no 1, p 60.

in relation to 'youth' in abstraction from the broader contours of class and gender division. As a result, the 'explanation' of 'social problems' can be more readily transposed onto the individual's personal qualities or 'natural' attributes: 'problems' are less the result of structural deficiencies or contradictions than personal inadequacies ('maladjustment' or 'psychological disturbance', for example).

The Social Problem Film

It is within these general parameters that the role of the social problem film can now be understood. For it is the cinema, along with the other media, which performs an active role in the definition and institutionalisation of 'social problems'. Thus, the construction of moral panics about teddy boy violence and prostitution in the '50s were as much the responsibility of the media as any other agency. Moreover, the aesthetic conventions which the 'social problem' film employs are not neutral but enjoy their own determinacy in the definition of how such 'problems' are to be understood. Such conventions, however, are not exclusive to the 'social problem' film but are shared with mainstream narrative cinema in general. What is distinct in the 'social problem' film is not any set of exclusive characteristics (such as a specific iconography) but its specific mobilisation of more general conventions, especially those of narrative and realism.¹¹

A central characteristic of the 'social problem' film, for example, is its adoption of the conventions of narrative as a means of sugaring the didactic pill. But, insofar as it is in the logic of classic narrativity to work towards a resolution of the initial narrative disruption, and thus bring the narrative to a close, so an attitude towards the 'social problem' is already presumed by the form adopted. As Seymour Chatman suggests, there is always a sense, in the traditional narrative, of 'problem-solving', 'of things being worked out in some way'.¹² To the extent that the film's 'social problem' is articulated into this problem-solving structure of narrative so is it also implied that it too can be 'solved'. As such, the discourse conventionally mobilised by the 'social problem' film is that of social control, the maintenance of social order by either assimilation or containment. The 'problem' of juvenile delinquency can thus be 'resolved' by either rehabilitation (*I Believe In You*), punishment (*The Wind of Change*, 1961) or destruction (*No Trees In the Street*, 1959) of the offender. In none of these 'solutions' is the social order itself put into question. There can, however, be a tension between these possible 'solutions'. Characteristically, it is the reformist solution, the capacity for social accommodation, which is stressed by such movies. It is for this reason that Russell Campbell highlights the capacity of the American 'social consciousness' film to portray negative aspects of American society while simultaneously confirming 'the possibility . . . of corrective action' and celebrating 'the system for being flexible and susceptible to amelioration'.¹³ But, this is not always the case. Insofar as the 'problem' may prove too excessive, too defiant of assimilation, so the 'social

problem' film may fall back on the alternative 'solution' of direct repression. Thus, in the case of *Violent Playground* and *Sapphire*, the logic of reform which both films seek to embody is disturbed, even subverted, by eruptions of violence and sexuality which prove impossible for the films to contain save by force.

But while the social problem film may tell a story, it is also concerned that its content should not be viewed as purely fictional. To this extent, the anonymous enunciation characteristic of the 'classic realist text' is not a sufficient legitimisation of its claims to verisimilitude but must be extended through the use of documentary techniques (e.g. location shooting) and an appeal to 'factual' sources. Thus, *Violent Playground* ('obviously inspired by fact', according to *Kine Weekly*) was based upon the Liverpool Juvenile Liaison Officers Scheme while *Sapphire* adopted Notting Hill locations to underwrite its reference to the inter-racial riots of the previous year. But, insofar as such claims to 'facticity', to an adequate signification of 'reality', continue to rely upon the iconic characteristics of photography, so the cognitive status of their cinematic realism is dependent upon an epistemology of vision, an appeal to 'an empirical notion of truth'.¹⁴ The guarantee of 'truth' (internally organised by the narrative meta-discourse rather than measured against some external standard of truth) ultimately resides in what we can see.

In terms of an understanding of social problems, however, the implication is to suppress those elements not directly accessible to vision, but which nonetheless have their effects upon the empirical. For example, it is possible to show how the poor live on the screen. It is rather more difficult (remaining within the conventions of realism) to demonstrate how such poverty is the effect of a particular economic system or socially structured pattern of inequality. It also helps throw light on Russell Campbell's complaint that social consciousness movies repress 'social and political dimensions' in favour of 'private, personal dramas'.¹⁵ For not only is individualisation implicit in the conventions of narrative whereby it is individual characters (and very often one central character) whose desires and ambitions structure the story's forward flow, but also a consequence of the conventions of realism with their dependence on the 'empirically' observable and hence the inter-personal rather than structural.

Insofar as the social problem film is capable of extending its 'explanations' of social problems beyond the inter-personal this tends to be the responsibility of dialogue. But, to the extent that it is a characteristic of realism to privilege the image over the word, so the social problem film's reliance on dialogue as a means of making 'general' statements which go beyond the particularity of the story may be rendered problematic. As Colin MacCabe suggests, 'contradictions' between what we see and what we hear are conventionally resolved in favour of the image.¹⁶ What I want to suggest, however, is that the subordination of dialogue to the visual is not always so straightforward as his example from *Days of Hope* suggests (i.e. the undercutting of the mine-owner's speech by the image of troops at bayonet practice). Thus, in the case of *Sapphire*, the tension between what we are told about racial prejudice, as expressed by the

¹⁴ Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian theses', *Screen*, Summer 1974, vol 15 no 2, p 8. On the iconic sign, see Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1972 and Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981.

¹⁵ Russell Campbell, *op cit*, p 57.

¹⁶ Colin MacCabe, 'Days of Hope - A Response to Colin McArthur', *Screen*, Spring 1976, vol 17 no 1, p 100.

dialogue, and what we actually see is not explicitly structured as a discrepancy, as in the case of the example from *Days of Hope*, but the rather more complicated failure of the conventions adopted to substantiate the message which the film's dialogue would seek to secure.

Violent Playground

Both *Violent Playground* and *Sapphire*, then, are 'social problem' films, conceived as interventions in contemporary social debates and marked by a concern to promote 'rational' and reformist solutions to the 'problems' of juvenile delinquency and racial prejudice. In both cases, however, the preferred discourse of rationalism is upset and rendered problematic. Thus, in the case of *Violent Playground* the ostensive liberalism of its reform position begins to crumble, finally giving way to a logic of punishment and repression.

To a large extent, this is structured by the film's choice of conventions, in this case, those of the criminal investigation, which effectively circumscribes the film's discourse on the prevention of juvenile delinquency within the confines of crime detection and solution. Thus, while CID (Criminal Investigation Division) man Truman (Stanley Baker) is taken off the case which initiates the film (an arson attack), it is through his transfer to Juvenile Liaison, by bringing him into contact with Johnny (David McCallum), that the crime is able to be solved. In this way, the focus on prevention does not so much displace the process of law enforcement as temporarily suspend it. As such, the ideology of reform represented by the work of Juvenile Liaison must ultimately surrender to the requirements of the law and order position, of bringing to justice, implicit in the investigation format.

How this works out in detail can be seen in relation to the film's two main characters, Truman and Johnny. Truman is a bachelor, scathing of psychology and a firm believer in discipline (or 'walloping them'). As he himself puts it: 'I don't even like kids. I'm clumsy. I'm tactless. I'm brutal.' His transfer to Juvenile Liaison thus sets in motion a process of humanisation. Through his contact with the Murphys, he begins to understand the problems imposed by bad housing and broken families while his contact with the school headmaster, Heaven (Clifford Evans), and the work of the youth club develops an appreciation of the virtues of a liberal educational philosophy (particularly, in its effects on the two Murphy youngsters). Thus, by the halfway stage of the film his attitudes have undergone a dramatic reversal. He admits to no longer thinking like a policeman, takes exception to a colleague's reminder of his earlier disciplinarian prescriptions and successfully inverts the complaint, initially made against him, of being 'a bachelor' by using it as a reprimand against an angry stallholder, the victim of a juvenile theft. Meanwhile, his own bachelor status is at risk through a developing romantic interest in Kathy (Anne Heywood).

In this respect, the film's movement is logical and accumulative with the experiences undergone by Truman marking a re-emphasis on



Romantic interest in *Violent Playground*: Truman and Kathy.

prevention rather than punishment. But it is a re-emphasis of only limited scope. For what haunts and ultimately undermines this rational march forward is the position occupied by Johnny. Catherine Belsey has noted how the process of 'scientificity', of explicit rational deduction, in the Sherlock Holmes novels is 'haunted by shadowy, mysterious and often silent women' who elude and ultimately subvert the detective's project.¹⁷ The role of Johnny is similar. By virtue of his associations with violence and 'irrationalism', his presence is consistently marked as a threat, deflecting, eluding and ultimately undermining the project of reform which the film would seek to endorse.

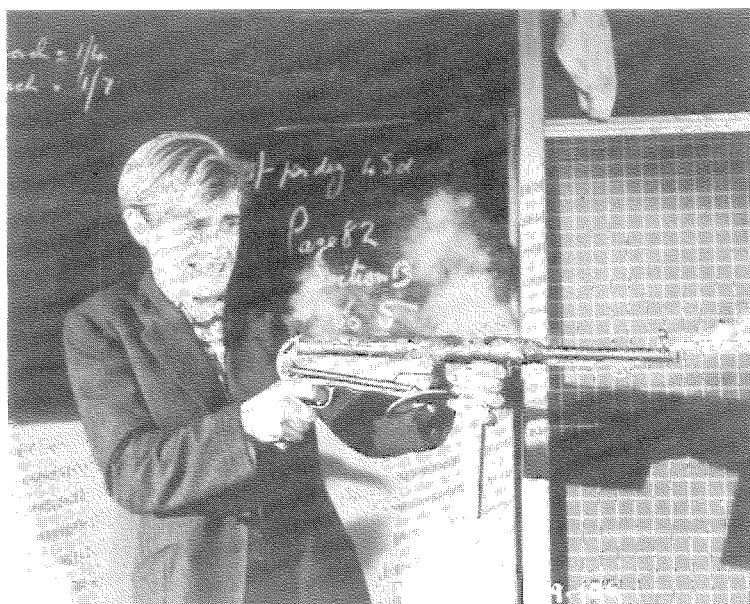
Johnny is introduced with his back to the camera as an emblem of the diversionary role he performs in distracting from Truman's successes with his younger brother and sister: first, by his assumption of the film's attention on their arrival at the flats and, second, by his interruption of the conversation between Kathy and Truman once inside the flat. Kathy, Johnny's elder sister, is educating Truman in the wiles of young Mary (Brona Boland). Just as she asks whether he is now 'beginning to understand', Johnny appears in the rear of the frame, upsetting the composition's symmetry. A cut to Johnny refocuses attention onto him, as he now assumes compositional prominence and takes command of camera movement. In so doing, Truman's acquisition of 'understanding' is brought to a halt: 'It's no use talking now,' announces Kathy. Once outside, he finds himself confronted by a gang of menacing youths, appearing as if from nowhere as the camera pulls back. Although allowed to pass (by virtue of an instruction from Johnny), the scene concludes with Truman alone and isolated in the frame, made small by the shot's high angle. The subsequent fade-out seems to mark, in turn, the darkness beginning to engulf his aspirations.

¹⁷ Catherine Belsey,
Critical Practice,
London, Methuen,
1980, p 114.



Signs of understanding or rejection: sports (top) or dancing.

The decisive blow to Truman's ambitions also occurs in the flat. At first, it would appear that Truman is making some headway with Johnny, when their discussion at the sports field suggests the beginning of a mutual understanding. Their return to the flat, however, successfully negates what progress has been made. Inside the flat, Johnny's friends are engaged in a wild and frenzied dance. A dancer is seen from the joint point of view of the two men. A cut back to Johnny and Truman



Violence as inevitability: Johnny's last stand.

suggests another point of view shot of the dancing to follow; in fact, the film now cuts obtrusively to the rear of Johnny's head, overcast by a dark line of shadow. The men's joint point of view is dramatically fissured, with Johnny's back turned defiantly against both Truman and the camera. Johnny then throws down his jacket, turns up the wireless and joins the dancing horde. The main beneficiaries of reform, the twins, are meantime revealed imprisoned behind a clutter of table and chairs. As with so many earlier Dearden films (e.g. *Cage of Gold*, 1950, *Pool of London*, 1951, *I Believe In You*, 1952) it is this world of music and dancing which upsets rational order and control through its release of the primal and dionysiac. As Jonathan Simmons suggests, 'It is the rock music which changes Johnny from a reasonably mixed-up kid into a savage, dancing to the tribal beat, all his animal instincts let loose from the thin veneer of civilisation.'¹⁸ Inevitably, the stage is now set for a full-scale eruption of the dangers the music has released: Johnny returns to arson and ends up waving a gun (significantly kept in a guitar case).

With this escalation of violence the film's logic of reform begins to crumble and the demands of authority begin to take over. As Truman explains to Kathy, 'You can feel too sorry for Johnny.' Accordingly, Truman informs the CID of his suspicions about Johnny and receives a kind of absolution from the local priest who promises to tell Kathy that 'you had to do your duty.' Back at the police station, the Chief Inspector (George Cooper) reinstates a law and order position, assuming a compositional prominence that temporarily removes Truman from frame: 'Haven't we had enough of these crazy mixed-up kids who go around bullying and ganging up on people, beating up old ladies? ... I'm a policeman. I've got respect for the law. I know it isn't fashionable. But let's spare a thought for the old lady. Not just for the old lady but you

¹⁸ Jonathan Simmons, *British Youth Problem Features of the 1950s*, unpublished MA Thesis, Polytechnic of Central London, 1983, p 67.

¹⁹ Stan Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1980, p 95.

²⁰ cf the remarks of Cohen, *ibid*, p 16: 'Each society possesses... a set of images of who constitutes the typical deviant... is he an innocent lad being led astray, or is he a psychopathic thug?'

and yours. If these children want to try living outside the law then they can pay the price at the court. I'm tired of tough-guy fever... sick and tired of it.' But, perhaps, most strikingly of all, Heaven, who had previously denied the existence of juvenile delinquents ('they're only juvenile') and shown contempt for the 'rules and regulations' embodied in the fire-door must now also change his mind and explain to the twins 'a rule's a rule'. The only place left for Johnny then is inside the police van. 'Deviants must not only be labelled,' writes Stan Cohen. 'They must be involved in some sort of ceremony of public degradation.'¹⁹ So it is now for Johnny. 'It's right that he should go in a black van,' comments Truman. 'It's right that people should see him go in there. It's right that Patrick should see him go in there if only to stop him going the same way.' Johnny as such cannot be saved and, as the black van draws into a crowded street, must serve as an exemplary sacrifice for the good of the community.

As a result, the film is torn between voluntarism and determinism in its account of delinquent behaviour. By emphasising the cultural heterogeneity of its youngsters – at once English, Irish, Chinese and Jamaican – the film effectively undercuts the early emphasis on environmentalism. Thus, Truman is able to inform Johnny 'you are what you want to be'. Even in the film's own terms, this is clearly not the case. Johnny, for example, attempts to enter the Grand Hotel (with its Rolls Royce clientele) but is, of course, debarred by virtue of age and class. But rather than focus on the real disadvantages suffered by Johnny, the film opts for psychopathy instead. Johnny cannot assume full moral responsibility, not because of environmental circumstances, but because of the compulsiveness of his own psychoticism (rooted in a childhood experience of fire-fighting). As such, he is fated by forces which belie rational control. In this respect, the film's appeal to religion is more than coincidental. The innocent/psychopath duality of delinquent demonology is now effectively supplanted by the good versus evil Manicheism of a Christian theology.²⁰ Truman reveals his parents to have been shepherds. Kathy kisses the palm of his hand and makes her way inside the church.

The damage which this now causes the film's perspective of reform seems to be partly recognised as the film inserts a concluding coda whereby the basic propriety of its reformism can be reinstated. In doing so, it merely underlines the repression underlying its notion of reform. This ending reintroduces the young black boy first seen at the film's beginning, when he had ignored the reprimands of Truman concerning the way he walked: 'Kids don't walk no more, they jive.' His subsequent reappearance, calling to Truman and then taking his hand, is clearly intended to be read as a sign of Truman's success. But, apart from its obvious contrivance, this reconciliation is hardly on equal terms. For Truman has moved no nearer an understanding of the boy's own culture and vitality. The boy, now walking 'properly', has merely submitted to Truman's terms.

Like *Violent Playground*, *Sapphire*'s contemporary subject matter (rising immigration, the Notting Hill riots) and social concern is intertwined with an investigative structure. While this structure provides the veneer of 'entertainment' felt necessary to hold an audience's attention, it also embodies a number of the film's values. For the principle of rational deduction upon which the classic detective formula is based in turn embodies the spirit of rationalism which the film wishes to apply to the problem of racial prejudice. In this respect, the end of the detective is not just that of crime-solution but a moral mission as well. Cawelti has suggested that such a missionary aspect to detection derives from the 'hard-boiled' detective novel, as represented by the work of Hammett and Chandler.²¹ But, whereas this is seen to result from a greater personal and emotional involvement with the criminals on the part of the detective, in *Sapphire* the detective remains aloof from his suspects in a manner more akin to the classic detective story. As such, the detective is not changed in the course of his investigation (cf. *Violent Playground*) but begins from a moral position which it is then his task to enjoin upon others. The moral authority which the detective thus represents is that of a white, middle-class and heterosexual male and derives solely from his superior rationality. In this respect, the tension between inquiry and action, fundamental to the detective story, is balanced in favour of inquiry and, in particular, discussion between characters. The aesthetic emphasis of the film is thus the conventional shot/reverse shot structure with its focus on reasoned discussion. It also sums up for the film what is, at root, the cause of racism: racial prejudice. This does not imply a socially institutionalised form of oppression, but rather an attitude of mind amenable to change through argument and an appeal to reason.

Such a disavowal of the social dimension and accompanying focus on individual attitudes is reinforced, like *Violent Playground* before it, by the heterogeneity of characters with whom Superintendent Hazard (Nigel Patrick) becomes involved. Such variety establishes the class differences within both black and white communities and emphasises the reciprocity in racial prejudice of blacks towards whites. Thus, the black community includes the wealthy son of an African bishop and barrister, Paul Slade (Gordon Heath), the respectable black professional, Dr Robbins (Earl Cameron) and the semi-criminal elements associated with the Tulips club and with Horace (Robert Adams). Moreover, as Slade makes quite clear, racial prejudice works both ways. His father would not have allowed him to marry Sapphire, because 'she was part white'. But what, above all, clinches this removal of social and economic division is the film's ultimate reliance on an ideology of nature.

This is not made explicit but crucially underpins the film's investigative logic. The film begins with Sapphire's body falling to the ground: the reverse shot which would identify the murderer is, however, withheld. Although it is the identification of the murderer which it is then the work of the investigation to solve it is, in fact, the identity of the victim which consumes much of the investigators' attention and finally

²¹ John G Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, University of Chicago Press, 1976.



'Who was Sapphire?' Inspecting the victim's petticoat.

provides the key to the crime's solution. Two scenes underscore this. In both cases, the two policemen, Hazard and Learoyd (Michael Craig), inspect items of Sapphire's clothing. In both cases the discovery of exotic clothing (a bright red taffeta, a nightdress) is marked by an eruption of colour into otherwise muted settings and suggests an enigma yet to be resolved. Insofar as Sapphire is revealed to be a 'half-caste', Learoyd suggests that the 'red taffeta under a tweed skirt' indicates the 'black under the white'. Hazard's response is to warn him to 'come off it', but what we see, rather than what we are told, renders suspect Hazard's rational perspective. The logic of the film's *mise-en-scène*, exploiting the novelty of Eastman colour, is that the coloured characters should add 'colour' in a more general sense. As Dearden explained: 'My idea is to throw all this (the sombre winter backgrounds) into contrast with the sudden splashes of colour introduced by the coloured people themselves. The things they wear, the things they carry, their whole personality.'²² This elision of skin colour with personality is significant. For it is precisely the effect of the film to expand the connotations of colour to the 'colour' of music and dancing, sexuality and violence (and hence motivate the fetishistic fascination of the detective for Sapphire's clothing with its suggestion of 'exotic' sexuality).

This becomes clear in one pivotal sequence. As has been suggested, the resolution of the crime which precipitates the film's plot is in turn dependent on a solution to the question of Sapphire's identity. Hence, the importance of the clues implying Sapphire's 'other side' (the clothes and torn photograph) and leading to the sites of her 'other life' (the International Club, Tulips). The explanation for these is then provided by the revelation of Sapphire's life as a 'half-caste', passing herself off as white and thus attempting to hide her 'blackness'. The argument of the

²² *Kine Weekly*,
December 25, 1958,
p 15.

film, made at the level of dialogue, is that 'you can't tell' the difference between white and half-caste. Saying so, as Sapphire's doctor argues, is as 'silly' as identifying a policeman 'by the size of his feet'. But, once again, what we are told is subverted by what we actually see (the empirical notion of truth upon which the film relies). Pam Cook employs the term 'pregnant moment' to denote those moments in a film when the ostensive ideological project of a film is undermined.²³ The scene occurring at Tulips suggests something similar.

The two detectives have entered the black club, Tulips, in an effort to identify Sapphire's dancing partner, the missing half of the torn photograph. The owner, Mr Tulips, claims to have no knowledge of Sapphire and, as he returns the photo to Hazard, observes Learoyd's outward gaze. Cutting to Learoyd's point of view we see an apparently white woman dancing in 'ecstatic abandon'²⁴ (as ER Cousins' novel of the film puts it). 'That's a "lilyskin"', comments Tulips as we cut back to the three men. A further point-of-view shot now reveals the young woman to be dancing with a black man, Johnny Hotfeet. Returning to the three men, Tulips continues his comments, 'Your chick was a lilyskin, wasn't she. . . . You can always tell . . . once they hear the beat of the bongo.' At precisely this moment, bongos can be heard on the soundtrack, and the camera moves down and forward, past the three men, onto another apparently white woman sitting behind them, as she begins to tap her feet. Learoyd observes the rapturous expression on her face before another eyeline match initiates a rapid montage sequence of 20 shots, all loosely conforming to the point of view of the three men. Cutting between the 'lilyskin' dancer, her partner Johnny Hotfeet, a black woman dancer, Johnny Fingers, the 'white' woman behind the men and the bongos, concludes with direct sequence-intercutting between low-

²³ Pam Cook, 'Approaching the work of Dorothy Arzner' in Claire Johnston (ed), *The Work of Dorothy Arzner*, London, British Film Institute, 1975, p 14. The term is derived from Roland Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein' in Stephen Heath (ed), *Image-Music-Text*, Glasgow, Collins, 1977.

²⁴ E R Cousins, *Sapphire*, London, Panther, 1959, p 115.

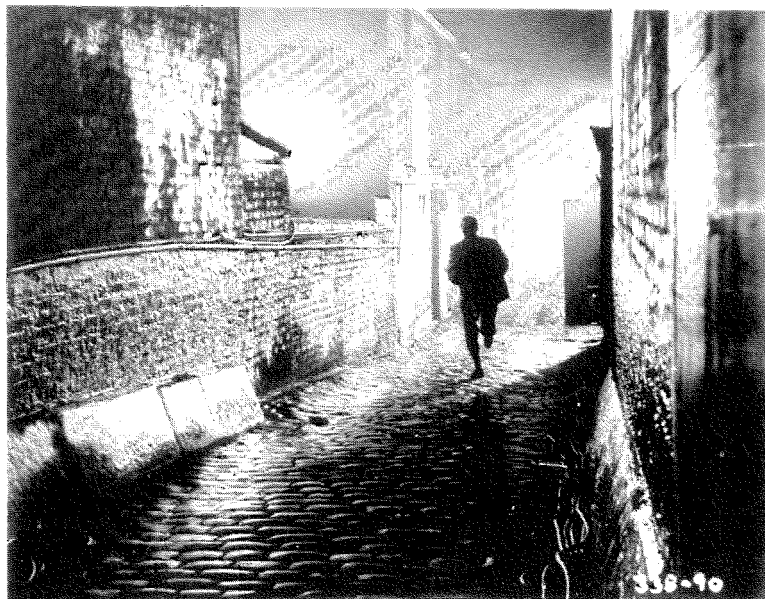


Tulips, a site of Sapphire's 'other side'.

angle shots of the 'lilyskin's' pants and thighs, revealed below her twirling skirt, and close-ups of the bongos.

Formally, the scene confirms the British cinema's taste for sub-Eisensteinian and 'crudely emotive' editing techniques, noted by Dyer²⁵. Like the similar scene in *Violent Playground* it also marks a 'descent' into music and dancing, now explicitly interlinked with sexuality by the use of low-angle shots up the dancer's skirt (with its reference back to Sapphire's red taffeta). And just as Truman had been confronted with an explosion of forces, apparently at odds with his project of rational control, so now is Hazard. Up to this point, it has been his position that you 'can't tell a lilyskin'. With this scene, it would appear that you can. For once the 'beat of the bongos' begins, the 'white' women do indeed 'give themselves away', as Tulips suggests. As if to emphasise the point, the last six shots of the scene directly intercut shots of 'white' women dancing with close-ups of the bongos. Significantly, when we cut out of the scene it is to shots of Tulips and Learoyd, not Hazard. It has been Learoyd's position throughout the film (and the apparent sign of his bigotry) that you can always tell. The cutback to him, rather than Hazard, thus seems to underline the displacement of Hazard's position that has occurred and temporarily constructs an identification with Learoyd rather than the 'rational' Superintendent.

Such a setback would seem to be confirmed by the scene which follows. As Johnny Fiddle (Harry Baird) flees the club, what had previously been a sedate enquiry transforms into a frenzied chase through the dark, wet streets of the city (reminiscent of *noir* in its choice of compositions and lighting). Johnny's attempts to find a hiding-place foregrounds the themes of sex and violence, running together the ideas of sexuality and criminality in the process. He is evicted from the white,



Shades of *film noir*: the chase.

working-class café, Joe's: 'We got copper trouble too . . . but we ain't got your sort of woman trouble. So get out and stay out.' Continuing his flight, he is then set upon by a group of teddy boys. Although undoubtedly taking its cue from the Notting Hill riots, in the context this explosion of violence stands entirely at odds with the reason the film is seeking to espouse. That such 'meaningless violence' should be the climax to the 'ecstatic abandon' of *Tulips* is, in the film's terms, hardly coincidental.

The resulting perspective on race with which the film concludes is thus something rather different from the one that is espoused by Hazard. Like Douglas Sirk's American film of the same year, *Imitation of Life*, the root of the 'half-caste's' problem is less racism, or even racial prejudice, than passing themselves off as something they're not. In Sirk's film, the answer is to abandon the circle of deceit, or 'imitation of life', in favour of an acceptance of black identity. But, while Sirk views this as a progressive position, presaging the upsurge of the blacks' civil rights movement, it nonetheless traps black people into an ideology of nature, an 'essentialism' in which nature becomes destiny.²⁶ While *Sapphire* does not have *Imitation of Life*'s appeal to black solidarity, it does in a similar way confine its blacks, as 'essentially' different (rhythmic, sexual) and determined by nature ('lilywhites' really can't escape the beat of the bongo). To this extent, the film ends up confirming the very prejudices it would seek to subvert. For its ascription of natural qualities is, of course, not natural at all but the projection of its own culture's values, values which form part of the problem not a solution to it.

Indeed, read according to one light, the film itself comes close to suggesting this. Contrary to most expectations set up by the movie, the killer turns out to be the sister of *Sapphire*'s white fiancé. As Dyer has pointed out, the 'unfulfilled woman' (unmarried and/or childless) is a frequent culprit in the social problem pictures of the period (*Lost*, 1955, *Serious Charge*, 1959, *Victim*) and Milly (Yvonne Mitchell) can be seen to conform to this category.²⁷ Although married, and with children, she is nonetheless the victim of a joyless marriage to a seaman who 'doesn't seem to get much leave . . . or doesn't want it'. In this respect, Milly's relapse into hysteria makes sense. Hysteria was, of course, a recurring preoccupation of Freud's, conventionally identified with women and understood as the symptomatic transcription of repressed sexual desires.²⁸ At the same time, as Hoch suggests, the sexual mythologies surrounding blacks may themselves be understood as the externalised embodiment of internally repressed desires.²⁹ In effect, Milly's hysteria is the complement to the explosion of black sexuality at *Tulips*, just as her act of murder had been provoked by *Sapphire*, pregnant and 'swinging her legs' before her. In a way, this is the irony at the heart of the movie. For the locus of violence is not in fact the blacks but the respectable white middle-class family home. The real danger is not the threat without but the sexual repression that's within.

²⁶ Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1971, p 130: 'The imitation of life is not the real life. . . . The girl (Susan Kohnner) is choosing the imitation of life instead of being a Negro. The picture is a piece of social criticism. . . . You can't escape what you are.'

²⁷ Richard Dyer, *op cit*, p 18.

²⁸ See Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, pp 77-78 and Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix*, London, Macmillan, 1982, pp 42-48.

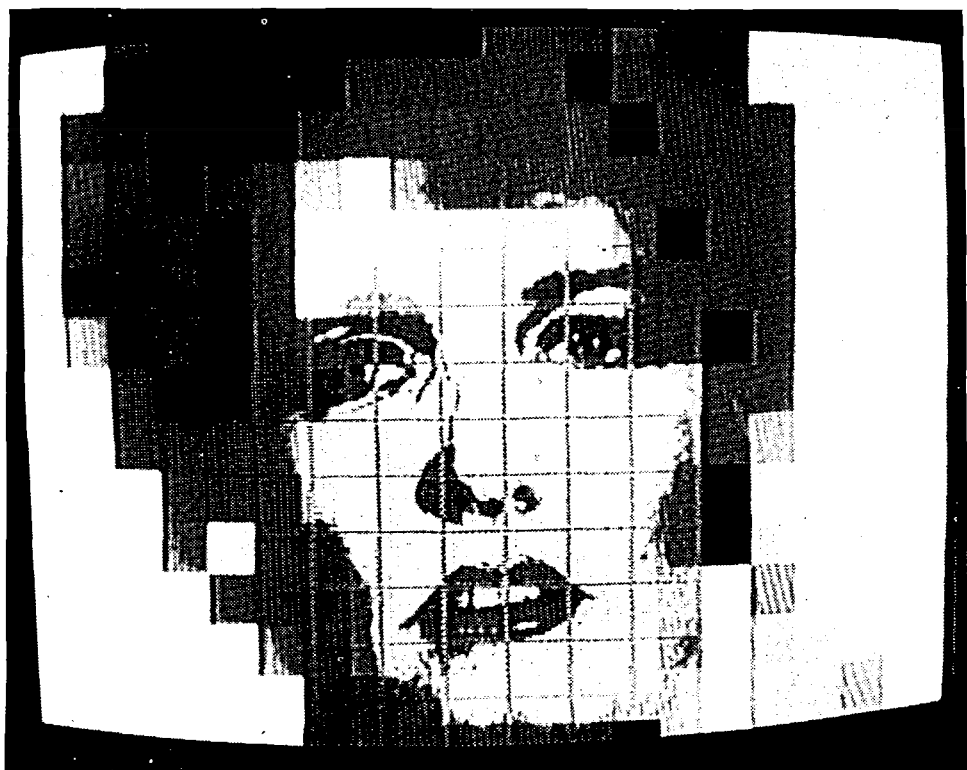
²⁹ Paul Hoch, *White Hero Black Beast: Racism, Sexism and the Mask of Masculinity*, London, Pluto, 1979, p 54.

Conclusion

Concluding his remarks on the treatment of anti-Semitism in *Crossfire*, Colin McArthur registers his alarm at how 'the processes of the production and understanding of meaning have been naturalized to the degree that they are no longer . . . grasped on a conscious level.'³⁰ If this is so of an 'anti-realist' film such as *Crossfire*, he suggests, how much more likely will it be of films made within a realist and/or naturalist aesthetic. But, of course, just as the 'social message' of *Crossfire* cannot be divorced from the conventions in which it is embedded, so do the conventions employed in the 'social problem' film play an equally active role in the production of meanings. And just as these may as much subvert as confirm the 'social message' of a film like *Crossfire*, so is it also the case with the 'social problem' film. This is also true of the relationship between film text and social context more generally. For while it is impossible to make 'sense' of the 'social problem' film independently of more generally available social discourses (be they concerned with juvenile delinquency, race or whatever) this does not imply that such discourses are unproblematically reproduced in the cinema. As John Ellis suggests, the film text 'may take for granted certain meanings, certain assumptions, but it exists to take risks, to work through ideological problems . . . ideological meanings . . . are not reproduced so much as refreshed, not so much repeated as reworked.'³¹

³⁰ Colin McArthur, *op cit*, pp 31-32.

³¹ John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, p 74.



camera obscura / 12

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'SAPPHIRE', 'DARLING' AND THE BOUNDARIES OF PERMITTED PLEASURE

BY CARRIE TARR

*The sensational story of a girl who didn't belong...*¹

*When she was good, she was very, very good...
and when she was bad, she was 'Darling'*²

¹ *Daily Cinema*, April 17, 1959, p 2.

² *Daily Cinema*, August 18, 1965, p 17.

³ Pam Cook, 'Melodrama and the Women's Picture', in Sue Aspinall and Robert Murphy (eds), *Gainsborough Melodrama*, London, British Film Institute, 1983.

⁴ *Daily Cinema*, April 20, 1959, p 6.

⁵ *Daily Cinema*, November 8, 1965, p 10.

⁶ See Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, chapter 5.

⁷ Stan Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, London, MacGibbon and Kee, 1972.

THE CONJUNCTION OF film titles and advertising copy indicates the interest of *Sapphire* and *Darling* for feminist film criticism, for each appears to pivot around 'the feminine'. While feminist film criticism has challenged our experience of the classic Hollywood film, such work has barely begun in relation to British films. Yet Pam Cook's article on Gainsborough melodrama³ stresses that the differences between these British melodramas and their American counterparts may be more important than their similarities. This article sets out to analyse the textual strategies of two films which are recognisable in terms of conventional genres (a 'whodunit'⁴ and a 'smart set melodrama'⁵), but which also demonstrate a documentary impulse as picture essays on aspects of British, or more specifically London, life. The combination of a concern with social reality and a narrative motivated by female desire points to the potential for 'trouble in the text'⁶. *Sapphire* and *Darling*, products of particular conjunctures and very different in their choice of narrative and stylistic conventions, will be troubled, if at all, in very different ways. A much wider study is required to determine to what extent they may be representative. Nevertheless, a comparison of their textual strategies may be indicative of shifts in the part played by British cinema in the sexual debates of the period 1959-1965.

The period of the late '50s and '60s is marked by what Stan Cohen has described as a 'moral panic'⁷, directed above all at young people whose supposed decline in sexual standards was perceived as threatening the nation's values and interests. Fears and anxieties about their supposed promiscuity and its effects generated debates which would have been unthinkable in the early '50s about such vexed issues as sex education, birth control, VD, abortion, divorce, etc, which were disseminated to a wide audience through the media and especially TV. Moral conservatives, epitomised by Mrs Mary Whitehouse, who set up her Clean Up TV Campaign in 1963, demanded a return to the traditional values of family life; while liberals sought a greater openness about sex and sexual

problems, including a reconsideration of the ideal of pre-marital chastity, and the reform of restrictive legislation relating to sexual behaviour. (Reforms of the laws on abortion, divorce and homosexuality were achieved by the end of the decade.) Underlying the liberal position and gradually gaining currency was the far-reaching notion that individual choice could be – and should be – distinguished from public morality. But it was not until after 1965 that a more radical counter-culture emerged which perceived sexuality divorced from marriage, reproduction and child-rearing as potentially subversive. Anxieties about what came to be pejoratively termed ‘permissiveness’ in the period under review seem to have been curiously misplaced. Studies such as Michael Schofield’s *The Sexual Life of Young People*⁸ suggest that Britons of the period matured earlier but also married earlier and that their sexual behaviour and attitudes towards sex were generally conformist and conservative. This discrepancy between fears and facts may be accounted for as ‘a displacement of the anxieties aroused by the nature of the social changes, especially expressed in the young autonomous styles of the various youth cultures, on to the terrain of sexuality where hidden fears and social anxieties could most easily be stirred’⁹.

Although young people of both sexes may have been the objects of moral concern, the opening up of controversies and contradictions in the definitions of acceptable sexual behaviour necessarily had more direct implications for women, given that the way women’s sexuality is defined and regulated constitutes an important form of patriarchal control. Yet, according to Jeffrey Weeks, young women in this period continued to aspire to marriage as ‘the essential gateway to independence, social status, sexual gratification and children’¹⁰. Indeed, Elizabeth Wilson stresses that ‘it is impossible to overemphasize the importance of marriage as a central and organizing idea in both the 1950s and the 1960s’¹¹. Women who did not conform – unmarried mothers, lesbians, celibate women – were perceived as lonely misfits. However, the pattern of women’s lives was gradually changing. Women were a vital element in the economy of the ’50s and ’60s both as members of the work force and as controllers of the household purse. The growth of the work of the Family Planning Association and the development of ‘the Pill’ meant that by 1965 more women were in control of their fertility. (Unmarried women needing contraception were suspected of being prostitutes, and the FPA did not decide to give them contraceptive advice until 1966, a change of policy largely due to the influx of unmarried West Indian women.¹²) The introduction of the pill was important above all because it generated discussion (and fears) about the possibility of sexual pleasure for women as an end in itself, freed from the demands and fears of reproduction. Birth control, despite all its problems, seemed to offer women the potential for sexual equality, at least within marriage. Yet, if young women were more aware of themselves as sexual beings and of the potential for self-fulfilment through pleasurable sexual relations, this awareness was not unproblematic. Sexual relations for many women were in reality marked by ignorance and dissatisfaction (as marriage counselling services discovered) and often by vio-

⁸ See Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, London, Longmans, 1981, p 253.

⁹ *ibid*, p 254.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p 257.

¹¹ Elizabeth Wilson, *Only Halfway to Paradise*, London, Tavistock, 1980, p 88.

¹² *ibid*, p 100.

¹³ Jeffrey Weeks, *op cit*, p 258.

¹⁴ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, London, MacGibbon and Kee, 1970, p 71.

¹⁵ See Roy Armes, *A Critical History of British Cinema*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1978; Alexander Walker, *Hollywood England*, London, Michael Joseph, 1974.

¹⁶ Alexander Walker, *op cit*, preface.

¹⁷ Andy Medhurst, "'Victim': Text as Context", *Screen* July-October 1984, vol 25 nos 4-5, pp 22-35.

¹⁸ John Hill, 'Working-Class Realism and Sexual Reaction: Some Theses on the British "New Wave"', in James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds), *British Cinema History*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983, p 304.

¹⁹ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, pp 6-18.

²⁰ John Hill, *op cit*, p 308.

lence and coercion. At the same time, women were increasingly being addressed by the media, and by advertising in particular, as both domestic homemaker and sexy playmate, 'the Monroes and the Bardots replacing in popular iconography the more resiliently "independent" female figures of the 1940s'.¹³ The threat of female sexual autonomy was being recuperated by means of images of sexually available women whose pleasure lay in pleasing their men. As Elizabeth Wilson notes, a rebellion against such images was to constitute an important factor in the beginning of the women's movement. For young women in the period 1959-1965, the unresolved sexual debates and the proliferation of imagery of women as 'sexual object'¹⁴ must have provoked confusion and unease, as they experienced the tension between the quest for personal fulfilment and their traditional roles as wives and mothers.

British cinema during this period is perceived in conventional histories¹⁵ as undergoing significant transformations, breaking away from the stultifying traditions of the 1950s with a profusion of new films and new talents. While *Sapphire* (1959) is conventionally ascribed to traditional pre-New Wave British cinema, *Darling* (1965) is seen as a product of Britain's 'vitality fantasy', a term used by Alexander Walker to describe the mood behind the movies of the mid-sixties. It is his view that cinema was 'one of the agents of fantasy contributing to the social revolution in Britain'.¹⁶ For women, however, such social changes as there were were problematic and contradictory. British cinema in the '60s may have addressed the issues of class and sexuality in increasingly outspoken ways to the extent that, as Andy Medhurst points out in his article on *Victim* (1962), increasing 'frankness' in the treatment of sexual matters within a realist aesthetic 'was a crucial part in their (i.e. British 'New Wave' films) being acclaimed as some kind of artistic renaissance'.¹⁷ However, given the gender bias of British cinema both on and off the screen, it is to be expected that any such treatment would privilege male points of view. In his discussion of certain British New Wave productions John Hill has suggested that mysogyny is 'embedded in the very structures of the films'.¹⁸ Drawing on Laura Mulvey's notion that classic narrative films bear a sadistic structure¹⁹, he identifies in those films which centre on a working class male hero, the pattern whereby women characters are devalued and punished. He notes how the women characters are used to embody the negative and threatening values against which the male heroes take their stand, arguing that Alison represents a particular social order in *Look Back in Anger* (1958) while in *A Kind of Loving* (1962) 'the superficial values of the new "affluence" are linked inextricably with women'.²⁰ In both *Sapphire* and *Darling* the women characters are pegs on which are hung critiques of aspects of contemporary society and as such they are mere abstractions, embodying respectively the 'problems' of racial identity and permissiveness. Yet they are also specifically female, and it remains to be seen whether these two texts, by choosing narratives apparently motivated by female desire, thereby show the strains of holding down contradictions and offer the female spectator the possibility of pleasurable identifications with a female point of view.

Sapphire was produced by Michael Relph and directed by Basil Dearden, whose partnership dated back to the early '40s and Ealing. Following the success of *Violent Playground* (1958) which had taken juvenile delinquency as its topic, it was one of a series of 'problem' films made in the 1950s and early 1960s²¹. These films aimed to combine popular entertainment with serious subject matter. Race relations were particularly topical in the year following the 1958 Notting Hill riots, and in *Sapphire*, Dearden and Relph aimed to 'show this (colour) prejudice as the stupid and illogical thing it is'²². The film, from an original script by Janet Green, uses the conventional formula of the whodunit through which to explore attitudes towards racial difference. The plot of *Sapphire* is standard: a body is discovered on Hampstead Heath, a number of clues enable the police to pursue various suspects, any one of whom might have had the motive and the opportunity to commit murder, and finally the murderer – the least likely suspect – is identified, the mystery solved. What differentiates this particular whodunit is the way race relations are woven into the narrative. The murdered 'girl' turns out to be Sapphire Robbins, a woman of mixed race. The police investigation therefore hinges on her ambivalent links with London's black and white communities, and each situation uncovered provides the opportunity for comment on the experiences and prejudices of racial hatred. Finally the murderer turns out to be a white woman, the bigoted sister of the victim's fiancé. The police protagonists, whose investigation structures the text, themselves embody a debate around the irrationality of racial prejudice: Superintendent Hazard (Nigel Patrick) is a model of liberal tolerance, while his sidekick and alter ego, Inspector Learoyd (Michael Craig), is a man whose prejudices are gently challenged as the film progresses. The narrative ends on a note of conciliation as Learoyd shakes hands at last with Sapphire's brother Dr Robbins (Earl Cameron), and of resignation, too, for as Hazard admits, 'We didn't solve anything, Phil. We just picked up the pieces.'

Interest in the film was generated prior to its release by its promise of authenticity ('The location schedule covers half a dozen authentic settings and reads like a travelogue of London'²³), and confirmed – according to the critics – by its daring ('the eye-opening frankness with which it discloses the bitterness and misery – and also the dignity – of a coloured community living near to the edge of racial hate'²⁴). In fact, the choice of London locations sets up an invidious contrast between the black and white communities mediated by the 'neutral' territory of the police investigation. Locations which designate the black communities include street scenes of slum housing and racial violence, while interiors range from the International Club (a paternalistic image of multi-racial harmony) to the infamous Tulips (a wild night spot) and the underworld (Horace Big Cigar and his gang), significantly omitting images of family life. The white communities are represented predominantly by the student-oriented settings of college, coffee bar and Bayswater digs, and

²¹ See John Hill, 'The British "Social Problem" Film: "Violent Playground" and "Sapphire"', in this issue.

²² *Kine Weekly*, December 25, 1958, p. 15.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Derek Monsoy, *Sunday Express*, May 10, 1959.

²⁵ Isobel Quigley,
Spectator, May 15,
1959.

²⁶ William Whitebait,
New Statesman, May
16, 1959.

²⁷ See David Robinson,
Financial Times,
December 11, 1959.

²⁸ *Daily Cinema*, April
17, 1959, p 2.

by the respectable (yet oppressive) home of shabby genteel David, Sapphire's fiancé (Paul Massie), and his family. Critical reaction to the film was concerned primarily to assess the success with which whodunit and social problem had been merged, and the consequent effectivity of the film's message of racial tolerance. Though the majority of reviewers lauded the film's achievements, a significant minority were disturbed by its apparently unconscious racism, drawing attention to the stereotyping of the characters, especially some of the black cameo roles, and to a *mise-en-scène* which equates colour with 'tomtoms, slums, rackets, zooty suits, taffeta petticoats'²⁵. The film was thereby perceived as failing to confront the real social issues. 'Notting Hill, we may feel, deserves serious handling or none. As it is, Colour provides the red herring to keep us from spotting the murderer too soon.'²⁶

However, the murder mystery itself constitutes a further red herring to keep us from spotting that the film in fact turns about the investigation of a woman's sexuality. It is Sapphire herself who constitutes the film's enigma. For two weeks, billboards simply asked the question, 'Who is Sapphire?'²⁷ before the poster appeared displaying the dead body of a young respectably-dressed attractive red-haired woman, inset with the image of a laughing black male face, a background of wild dancing and a text offering 'the sensational story of a girl who didn't belong . . .'²⁸. It opens with an image of a woman's body being unceremoniously dumped and subsequently discovered, displayed in a manner which recalls the promise of the poster. A policeman warns, 'You won't like this—she's very young'. The image cuts from Sapphire's unseeing face to the impassive gaze of the police officers whose look the spectator is invited to share, as the corpse is subjected to what reviewer Len Mosley



Sapphire's corpse with enigmatic petticoat.

delightedly referred to as a 'psychological strip-tease'²⁹. On the surface, Sapphire is the innocent young victim of a vicious knife attack. But beneath her respectable tweed skirt she is found to be wearing an outrageous red taffeta petticoat, and the mystery begins. . . . She is identified first as a music student engaged to be married to an architecture student, then as a woman of mixed racial parentage (a fact dramatically revealed by the unexpected appearance of her brother) who loved dancing 'crazy', then as three months pregnant. These factors – her youth, her colour and her pregnancy – together inform the nature of the police investigation which defines Sapphire in terms of her sexuality, all the more threatening because she was young, independent and black. Her former black boyfriends – Paul Slade (Gordon Heath), an arrogant African lawyer, and Johnny Fiddle (Harry Baird), her pathetic if unsavoury dancing partner – are considered likely to have murdered Sapphire because she had 'gone white' and abandoned them (i.e. out of sexual jealousy). The motivation of David and his family is more complex. Clearly, as they finally acknowledge, 'we all had hate in our hearts'. But Sapphire constituted an obstacle to their lifelong ambitions for David's career, whatever her colour. The tragedy is set in motion by David's decision to marry her (and give up his scholarship to Rome) because she is pregnant: and her pregnancy is, of course, the result of her (not his) unashamed sexual licence.

This reading of the character Sapphire correlates with the fears and anxieties about young people's sexual behaviour voiced in the late 1950s. Sapphire has transgressed the accepted definitions of femininity in the active pursuit of her desire. She is punished both by her violent death and by her suppression from the narrative. Unable to answer the ques-

²⁹ Len Mosley, *Daily Express*, May 8, 1959.



Dancing 'crazy'.

tion of her identity herself, she is bound by the whodunit into a position of passivity, silence, absence. Yet the fascination which she exercises erupts into the film through the intrusion of sexual imagery. Her red petticoat, treated to a dramatic close-up, leads the police (and the spectator) to Babette's lingerie display. Her locked drawer delivers up a flurry of exotic underwear (accompanied by a strident musical chord!). And the torn photograph of Sapphire dressed for dancing leads to the beat of the bongos at Tulips, where the camera indulges in a saucy shot up the legs of another woman whose appearance is as deceptive as Sapphire's. Sapphire's story is fascinating not in terms of the historical moment for people of mixed racial parentage living in Britain in 1959, but because she is a sexually attractive and independent young woman who gets her come-uppance just at the moment when she seems poised to achieve her ambition. Her racial origins, foregrounded by the deceptive appearance of her body, seem to be a particularly insidious and racist metaphor for yet another elaboration of the patriarchal myth of female duplicity. (It is striking that no male body in the film is similarly ambivalent.)

The film is structured not only around Sapphire's suppressed desire, but also around that of Milly (Yvonne Mitchell), the agent of her death. In terms of the whodunit, Milly is the ideal murderer: if Sapphire is defined through her relationships with men, Milly is the least likely suspect. Indeed, the film deliberately misleads the spectator into presuming her innocence through a completely unjustified scene in which she talks to her father as though neither has any knowledge of Sapphire's death. The revelation of her guilt is surprising and swift, and leaves little opportunity for questioning the credibility of Milly's act. Her revulsion at the sight of a black hand tightening around a 'white' doll and her hysterical outburst of fear for her daughters' future are signs of the 'sickness' which the film sets out to show as stupid and illogical. But by offloading the guilt on to Milly, the film again sidesteps any serious confrontation with the question of racism. For Milly has been constructed throughout the film in very specific ways. She is a woman bringing up her daughters alone in her husband's absence. The camera frames her against the frozen food counter at the dairy where she works, suggesting that it is her frigidity which is responsible for the breakdown of the family unit. Furthermore she is neurotically overprotective in the way she treats her children. Milly the murderer is sexually inadequate both as a wife and a mother. She attacks Sapphire specifically at the moment when Sapphire taunts her with the suggestion that she has forgotten what it is to be wanted, as Sapphire herself is by David. Her breakdown allows patriarchal order to be both restored and exonerated. In the final sequence, mother and daughter embrace and weep, powerless and silent, while first father and son, then white man and black man, are reconciled. The spectator is left with a shot of a cloudy sky, the effect of which is to embrace and resume the events of the narrative and consign them to the realm of nature.

Sapphire is firmly marked by the point of view of the white middle-class males (the police protagonists) who order the film's investigation

both narratively and visually. It provides a further demonstration, if one were needed, of the 'deference to strong father-figures' characteristic of mainstream British cinema in the 1950s³⁰. However, there are signs of 'trouble' in the text, namely the eruption of sexual imagery associated with Sapphire, and the undoubted tensions within the family, indicated both on a narrative level (the situation has produced rifts and suspicions between all members of the family, but most particularly between father and son) and visually (the cold, grey, claustrophobic *mise-en-scène* signals the family home as the site of the repression and frustration which generates Milly's violent act). Order is restored by the resolution of the narrative, and overall in *Sapphire* the women's discourse is resolutely suppressed, offering female spectators no possibilities for pleasurable identifications with the female point of view. Yet female sexuality turns out to be the terrain on to which is displaced the film's ostensible concern with racism. *Sapphire* appears to be contributing to the moral panic of the late '50s and constructs female sexuality in particularly oppressive ways. In so doing, its aim as a 'problem' picture to portray aspects of contemporary reality is compromised and troubled.

II

Darling (1965) was produced by Joseph Janni and directed by John Schlesinger following their successful collaboration on *A Kind of Loving* (1962) and *Billy Liar* (1963). It is one of the many films which establish the 'swinging London' ethos and has been described as 'the archetypal chic film of the mid-60s'³¹. From an original script by Frederic Raphael, the film is loosely structured around the chronicle of the eponymous heroine, 'a composite picture of the 1965 girl (sic)'³². Diana Scott (played by Julie Christie, who as Liz in *Billy Liar* had already portrayed a sexually-independent rebel) is invited by an unseen reporter from a women's magazine to tell her story in her own words. The narrative is constituted by a reconstruction of episodes from her life, the organising principle being her quest for personal fulfilment. The film concentrates on the years spanning her two marriages, from dull immature Tony to the suave mature *prince*, via TV reporter Robert Gold (Dirk Bogarde), advertising executive Miles Brand (Laurence Harvey) and gay photographer Malcolm (Roland Curram). Her relationships with men are interwoven with the progress of her career from 'professional bosom' to the cover of *Ideal Woman* magazine, via 'Honeyglow Girl', 'Jacqueline' (a role in a horror movie as brief as Sapphire's) and 'The Happiness Girl'. Diana's own words form an intermittent commentary on the events of her life and constitute as one reviewer puts it, 'a satirical contrast all through between the cosy whitewash she gives readers and the unpretty reality'³³. The film's ending is bitterly ironic. As she boards the plane to leave London, she tells reporters that she is 'as happy as anyone could possibly be'. But the spectator is well aware that the trappings of success—a glamorous marriage and the cover story—conceal a ghastly emptiness, for Diana is 'the prisoner of a world she has conquered'³⁴.

³⁰ John Hill, 'Working-Class Realism and Sexual Reaction', op cit, p 306.

³¹ Roy Armes, op cit, p 257.

³² Plot synopsis, publicity handout, *Darling* microfiche, BFI Information Library.

³³ Isobel Quigley, op cit, 1959.

³⁴ Plot synopsis, op cit.

³⁵ *Warner Pathé News*
no 38, August 16,
1965.

³⁶ See *Observer*
interview, February
2, 1965.

³⁷ *Daily Cinema*,
November 8, 1965,
p 10.

Such a story would appear to be not only topical in its concern with changing women's roles in the '60s but also the very stuff of melodrama, playing over the contradictions, hopes and fears of a woman's life to their not unexpected conclusion. For when have good-time girls in the movies ever had things all their own way? Yet only one contemporary reviewer suggests that Diana's plight deserves pity. The intense emotions generated in Hollywood melodrama are in *Darling* entirely lacking. It may be that the film, although organised around Diana's story, is actually more concerned with 'the hard glossy world in which she moves'³⁵. Schlesinger himself commented in an interview that the film is 'essentially the study of a milieu'³⁶. His experience with documentary for the BBC *Monitor* programmes and his contribution to British New Wave cinema in his first feature films suggest that he may have approached his topic, 'the shifting fringe world where show business, high society and big business meet; the affluent world of the new rich and social climbers, where anything goes'³⁷, with a documentary eye. The film uses black and white film stock, suggesting the serious approach of a TV documentary, and location shooting in London, Paris and Italy (plus an extraordinary *vox pop* interview in Bristol). It constructs a wide-ranging social canvas through episodes which designate the affluent at work (primarily in the media: TV journalism, advertising, photography, etc.) and at play. Ironical juxtapositions, achieved by camera movement and *mise-en-scène*, indicate the film's concern to condemn the decadence of the world it is constructing (black lackeys wait on the wealthy at the World Hunger Draw banquet; the Queen's portrait seems to salute the self-confessed homosexuals). Scenes suggesting sexual licence (an orgy in a Parisian brothel, the *dolce vita* in Capri) appear to be documenting 'permissive-



Sexual licence in *Darling*: *la dolce vita* in Capri.

ness' with a new frankness, leading the *Observer* reviewer to remark that this is 'strong stuff' with 'transvestite scenes, corruption and love-making of a frankness hardly conceivable in a British film'³⁸. The film is intermittently accompanied by a curiously restrained musical score by John Dankworth (who also did the music for *Sapphire*). Reactions to the film's representation of affluence were decidedly mixed, and although Schlesinger's powers of observation were generally lauded, reviewers were critical on a number of counts: the characters are perceived as cold, various episodes (not always the same ones) are deemed unconvincing or heavy-handed, the mixture of satire and realism is seen as a problem, while the film's structure is felt to flounder. Furthermore, despite the regret at the passing of 'a certain flinty integrity' represented by the writer Southgate, *Darling* is perceived by some as being unsure of its moral values, fascinated by what it sets out to condemn. As Isobel Quigley remarks, it is not easy to tell whether the film is 'a dark cautionary tale or a sizzling slice of life'.³⁹

Could it be that the film's documentary concerns are rendered unsatisfying because of its narrative structured around the 'problem' of female desire? Certainly, reaction to the character of Diana herself is divided. A few reviewers argue that Diana is a realistic portrayal of a type of woman produced by contemporary social forces and attribute responsibility for her behaviour to the affluent society. The majority revel in this construction of the 'ultra-modern miss'⁴⁰ whose portrayal 'goes straight to the heart of the 60s girl'⁴¹, and proceed to condemn her for her vacuity and immorality. But a significant minority of reviewers are more cautious. Penelope Houston declares that Diana is 'stripped for stripping's sake'⁴², Kenneth Tynan describes her as 'a composite figure whose component parts do not entirely fit'⁴³ and elsewhere her character is felt to be barely credible, lacking in inner life, and obviously symbolic. This spread of reaction is perhaps in itself indicative of the headway made by liberal/progressive thinking in the mid-60s. Patriarchal assumptions about women are being challenged, and there is an awareness that Diana is artificially constructed and contained.

What then are the textual strategies that the text mobilises to achieve this effect? First of all, the role of Diana is inseparable from the film's apparent indictment of all that is contemptible in the shallow affluent world of the 'swinging sixties', not only because of her constant visual presence or because hers is the narrative function which gives the film such coherence as it has, but also because the film specifically uses her as a symbol of that world. The title sequence makes this quite clear: a huge poster of Diana's face is being pasted over an advertisement for World Hunger Relief, and the camera lingers over the juxtaposition of an image of a pleading black man and the detail of the glamorous face of Britain's Ideal Woman. The film goes on to dramatise how Diana achieved her success, and in the process demonstrates the extent to which she embodies all those qualities which the film deplors: like those around her, she is fickle, vain, affected, bitchy, superficial, callous, deceitful, greedy and self-interested. However, her success is most obviously attributable to her sexuality and lack of moral inhibitions.⁴⁴

³⁸ *Observer*, February 21, 1965.

³⁹ Isobel Quigley, op cit. See microfiche on *Darling*, BFI Information Library, for film reviews.

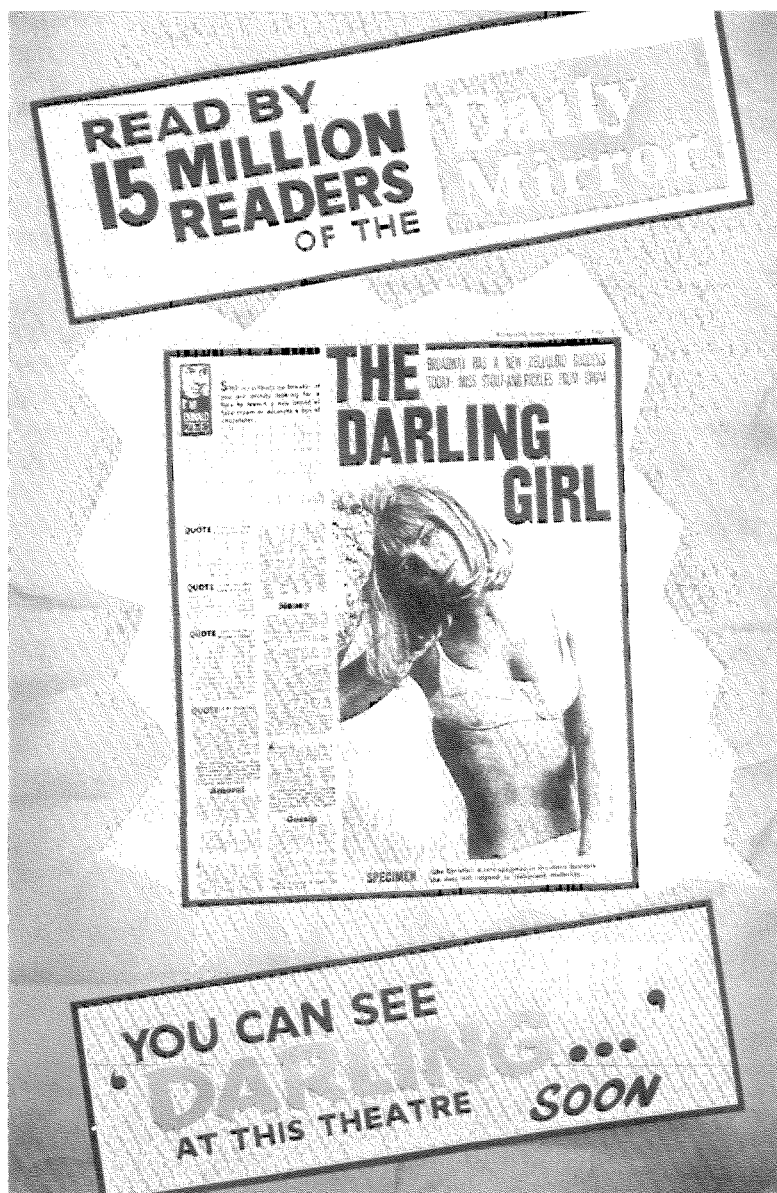
⁴⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, September 17, 1965.

⁴¹ Ann Pacey, *Sun*, September 14, 1965.

⁴² Penelope Houston, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1965, p. 196.

⁴³ Kenneth Tynan, *Observer*, September 19, 1965.

⁴⁴ Significantly, two other films of the 'swinging London' era construct their male protagonists quite differently. *Alfie* (1966) is amoral and exploitative, but the spectator is manoeuvred into a position of sympathy by the use of humour and point-of-view shots. In *Morgan, a Suitable Case for Treatment* (1966), the eponymous hero is sympathetically allowed to escape into a private world of insanity.



Julie Christie as specimen: advertising *Darling*.

The film's advertising campaign had promoted Julie Christie as Britain's sexy new international star ('Julie is a darling we can be proud of too'⁴⁵) and the posters showed an inset of the head and shoulders of an apparently naked Julie Christie, lying on a pillow smiling blissfully, flanked by insets of her co-stars, Dirk Bogarde and Laurence Harvey. The image here is ambiguous. Christie is object of the (male) look(s), yet she also returns that gaze, inviting the female spectator too to identify with her pleasure. Christie's image, followed by her powerful screen pre-

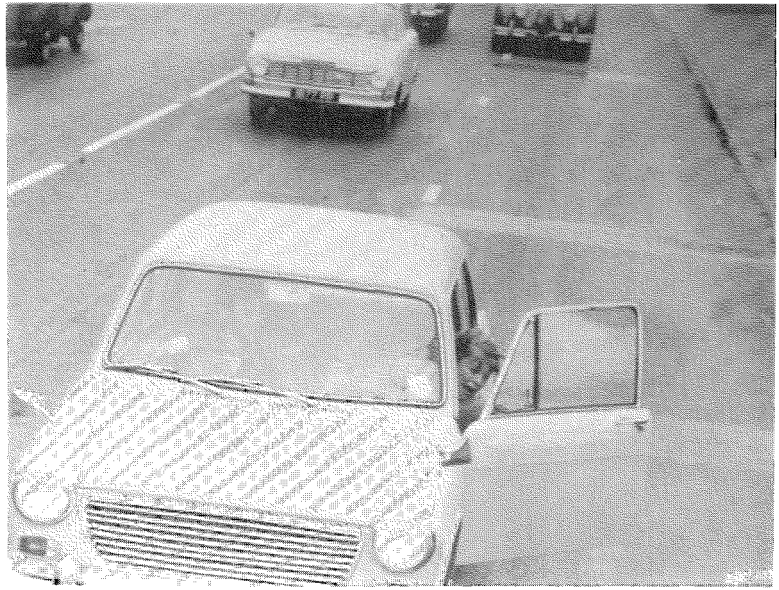
⁴⁵ William Hill, *Evening News*, September 16, 1965.



Diana breaks the rules at her sister's dinner party.

sence, seems to promise a celebration of a woman's sexual freedom. Diana is a woman who dares all: she frees herself from a stultifying marriage and family background (she is at her most appealing against the background of her sister's stuffy family dinner party), she refuses domesticity and motherhood and enters joyfully into the world of sexual adventure. Her looks, her wit, her powers of seduction, her spontaneity and her defiance of conventions, seem set to offer the female spectator a fantasy of mastery. She is enmeshed into the critique of 'swinging London' but she also embodies its vitality. The film manages to frustrate this pleasure in a number of ways which combine to problematise identification with her point of view.

The classic narrative pattern of devaluation and punishment of the woman character is here repeated internally throughout the film. Diana is allowed moments of pleasure, indicated primarily in her triumphant seductions and sexual pleasure, but also in her carefree defiance of conventions (driving at top speed round Trafalgar Square, shoplifting at Fortnum and Mason's, etc.). These moments are short-lived and followed by punishment: jealousy of Robert's wife, an unwanted pregnancy, humiliation from Miles, desertion by Malcolm, rejection from Robert and ultimate emptiness with the *principe*. The parking meter had warned her that Excess leads to Penalty! At these moments of doubt and despair, Diana is denied emotions with which the spectator might identify. Her distress is recuperated without even the sympathy of an expressive musical score. The script makes her appear bitchy, childlike or hypocritical. The commentary distances us from her predicament and underscores her shallowness. And the film builds up a play of mirrors, looks and images, which visually confirm that Diana is motivated only



The abortive leap.

by concern with the image she presents. These techniques work in various combinations throughout the text. For example, as the film draws to a close, Diana threatens to throw herself from Robert's car and gets as far as opening the door as the car is moving. Yet any sincerity or depth of feeling is undermined by her preceding petulant remark, 'I played the largest part' (in Robert's life, in preparation for the book he is planning to write), and her concern to set her face to rights in her mirror as they approach the airport.

The deliberate superficiality of this characterisation is all the more invidious in a film that uses Diana's image so knowingly. This image is not just the projection of Diana's inner emptiness or the product of a skill she manipulates to attract men. It is also a commodity which is taken up and exploited by men, a fact which Frederic Raphael explicitly acknowledges: 'The theme is the destruction of the female principle, the turning of a person into a commodity.'⁴⁶ *Darling* is very conscious of the ways images of women are constructed and circulated. Diana's progress depends on men promoting her (and their) career by exploiting her image. The film is aware that behind these images lies contempt. When Diana's photo is being chosen for the Happiness Girl campaign, 'Big blow-ups of Diana and other girls are being passed round like a cattle market. . . . During this a balloon – rather crude in the shape of a naked woman with a grinning face – a novelty from a different campaign, is being blown up, to many gigglements down the other end of the room.'⁴⁷ It is aware too of the discrepancies between 'real life' and such imagery of women, as the ironic contrast between Diana's experience as 'real' and mock princess demonstrates only too clearly. The closing shot of the film moves ironically from multiple images of Diana's face on the cover of

⁴⁶ *Daily Mail*,
September 14, 1965.

⁴⁷ Shooting script, BFI
Information Library.



The visual exploitation of Diana/Julie Christie.

Ideal Woman to the face of an old woman tramp (a 'real' person) singing in Piccadilly Circus.

Instead of sympathising with the woman caught up in these power relations, *Darling* itself operates at a similar level of visual exploitation. Throughout the film, Diana's/Julie Christie's face is subjected to the fascinated looks of the camera(s) and her body displayed in various stages of undress. At key dramatic moments, her point of view is seized from her, not just by the sly counterpoint of the commentary, but by the camera movement. As Diana rushes in despair through the *palazzo*, stripping herself of the accretions of wealth and glamour, the camera pulls back to allow a brief shot of her (Julie Christie!) naked. The film later cuts from Diana in bed blissfully contemplating a new life with Robert (an image which recalls the promise of the film's poster), to a shot of her happily looking at herself in the mirror until the camera pulls back to reveal Robert dressed and about to arrange for her departure. 'You just used me' she cries. 'You used me,' he retorts. 'It's a moot point.' Indeed.

In fact, the role of Robert is crucial for an overall reading of the film. He is the only other character whose presence/absence structures the narrative, and the way he is understood will inevitably colour judgements of Diana. The other men in her life are treated highly schematically in the episodic development of the narrative and are manifestly incapable of making her happy. But Bogarde's performance as Robert convinced a number of reviewers at least that he was the film's only good guy, a decent chap whose life is left in ruins by this 'man-eating model'⁴⁸. Certainly the ending shows him slumped in despair over his steering wheel, then a lonely figure watching Diana board her plane. And yet these images are disconcerting after his earlier sadistic treatment of her

⁴⁸ Cecil Wilson, *Daily Mail*, September 14, 1965.

in the hotel bedroom. The film quite early on establishes that Robert's life style (like his television reporting) is suffocatingly dull: a telling scene depicts Diana scratching at the window of their flat, imprisoned like the goldfish in their bowl. If Robert is perceived as another inadequate male, then *Darling* is not a simple classic narrative of containment, for it fails to re-establish any satisfactory pattern of male dominance. Men, marriage, romance, friendship, and family life have all been held up to scrutiny and all found wanting. At the end of the film Diana is alone.

Darling, though constructing a woman character whose very existence constitutes 'trouble', has marshalled a formidable battery of devices to prevent possibilities of identification with the female point of view. The contradictions of this position and the lack of an alternative structuring male discourse mean that the film does not work satisfactorily as melodrama. Yet the contradictions in the way that Diana is constructed as both responsible for her fate and the victim of forces in society, together with the excessive way in which she is punished by the narrative, mean that the film also fails to work satisfactorily as a study of social reality. However, it is clear that *Darling* did touch a raw nerve in public awareness. The description and condemnation of the character of Diana, particularly in the popular press, is of an extraordinary vehemence. She is variously a bitch, a witch, a slut, a trollop, a tramp, a wanton⁴⁹. The foregrounding of issues relevant to women's lives is obscured by a deeper need to appropriate and contain the threat of female sexual autonomy. Through its reactionary message that permissiveness, however momentarily pleasurable, will be punished, *Darling* appears to have made a signal contribution to repressive discourses around female sexuality in the contemporary context of anxieties about the 'permissive society'.

III

Annette Kuhn suggests that 'one of the defining generic features... of women's pictures as a textual system is a construction of narrative motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point-of-view'⁵⁰. It can be argued that in both *Sapphire* and *Darling*, the narrative is motivated by female desire. Although in each case the film's major project was a concern with wider topical issues, the 'problems' of racism and permissiveness seem to have been displaced on to the terrain of female sexuality. Each constructs a sexually-active woman with a (relatively) independent life-style, free from family constraints. Each acknowledges the tension between the woman's desire and the role of the family. In *Sapphire*, the threatened disintegration of the family, site of David's and Milly's revolt, is smoothed over by the narrative closure; in *Darling*, the family is openly constructed as a prison. Yet these films do not address themselves primarily to women. Their advertising campaigns appeal to a patriarchal fascination with woman as mystery, woman as defined by her sexuality (though this is not to deny the possibility of pleasurable identifications for women with images of sex-

⁴⁹ See microfiche on *Darling*, BFI Information Library, passim.

⁵⁰ Annette Kuhn 'Women's Genres', *Screen*, January-February 1984, vol 25 no 1, p 18.

ually liberated women at that time). The films work hard to construct viewing positions which suppress or discredit the woman's discourse and deny processes of spectator identifications with the female point of view; they are not, therefore, women's pictures.

In *Sapphire*, this is relatively unproblematic. The urgency of the narrative drive to solve the mystery leaves little space for a concern with the women characters as women, and the spectator is locked into the controlling point of view of the middle-class male protagonists, relatively untroubled by the eruptions of its repressed fascination with female sexuality. In *Darling*, however, where Diana's desire appears to structure the narrative, the comparative absence of any invitation to empathise with the woman and her predicament is in itself disconcerting, as is the lack of any alternative controlling male discourse within the diegesis. The position of knowledge privileged by the text disposes the viewer to direct moral disapproval at Diana both as a woman and as a symbol of 'the decay of the Western world'⁵¹. But the very detachment which the film effects enables the mechanisms of containment and appropriation to be laid bare, and the validity of the film's construction therefore to be doubted.

Each of these texts is the product of a particular conjuncture and worries over the 'problems' of youth, permissiveness and female sexuality in particular ways. The passage of the women characters from the girl who didn't belong to the girl who was everyone's darling, from absence to presence, silence to speech, object of the narrative to subject of the narrative, seems to bear a relationship to the growing independence of young women in Britain in the period 1959-1965 and to contemporary anxieties about female sexual autonomy. The texts operate strategies which work to contain the woman characters but which also trouble their success, as 'problem picture' (*Sapphire*) or as melodrama (*Darling*). In *Sapphire*, the suppression of the women's discourse now appears extreme, even hysterical; but in *Darling*, where the woman's discourse is both foregrounded and recuperated, Diana appears not only less completely contained but more fully exploited.

⁵¹ Len Mosley, *Daily Express*, September 14, 1965.

NATIONAL FILM CULTURES: POLITICS AND PERIPHERIES

BY STEVE McINTYRE

¹ Witness the last two BFI Summer Schools on 'National Fictions' and 'Fictions for the Fifties'; recent issues of *Framework* on Portuguese cinema (15/16/17) and Australian film culture (22/23 and 24); and the publication of books such as James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds), *British Cinema History*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1983.

Introduction

FOR SEVERAL YEARS national cinema history and national identity have figured on the agenda of film and media studies with increasing centrality.¹ This is for a variety of reasons, some good, others less so, and related both to factors particularly relevant to development, problems, and shifts in emphases in film theory, and more generally related to crises in left political thinking and activity. This article bids to chart some of these factors and tentatively pull together some senses of the contentious and notoriously versatile terms nationalism and national identity, while simultaneously beginning to evaluate the successes of different national film cultures (*vis-à-vis* 'British' film culture) in engaging with, opening out, and most crucially putting to use, aspects of national identity. In general I am attempting to make a case for a plurality of film cultures over and above the easy assumption that manifestations of cultural independence are automatically good things. At the same time I see national identity as a major political question which urgently needs addressing.

The article looks at British film culture and (potential or actual) Scottish, Welsh and Irish film cultures, but is not a detailed historical or descriptive account of these. Instead, it schematically traces political and cultural parameters which might provide a framework for thinking about national film cultures. This takes place along two axes: the first of these is principally concerned with the contemporary political significance of nationalism and national identity, and rests on understanding of the crucial relational concept of core and periphery. While the New Right in Britain has achieved a mobilisation of nationalism in reactionary directions, alternative formulations focusing on peripheral national identities have begun to offer opportunities for a powerful attack on this tendency. For this to succeed, it is essential not only that peripheral national identities develop confidently and forcefully, but that they resist retreat into sentimentality, irrationality and essentialism. It is here that peripheral film cultures have an urgent and inescapable role to play in the construction and circulation of progressive and relevant discourses of national identity.

The second axis is cultural. It considers the problem of the social and

political function of a film culture and the appropriate institutional structures and social relations to realise that function. The specific cultural and political dynamics of peripheral nations might allow development of new social relations of cinema and construction of a new conception of film culture. This point is perhaps best understood in considering the intersection of the two axes. Film cultures have a central role to play in articulating progressive notions of national identity. At the same time, and precisely because they are engaged in this task, national film cultures enter into alignments with other political and cultural groupings. It is within the network established through such alignments that cinema can begin to slough off aestheticism and apoliticism and begin to define for itself a new social function.

Rather than the slightly more specific 'national film industry', or even 'national cinema', the somewhat loose formulation 'film culture' is here being used deliberately in order to hold in play different aspects of the social function of cinema: a valuable national film culture cannot just be concerned with production. As well as aligning itself with other (non-film) groupings, it must prioritise work on audiences and conditions of reception, it must intensify education and debate, and it must develop theoretical endeavour, and relevant and responsible criticism.² In advancing this broad concept, I in effect reject the privileging of texts in the construction of national film cultures – 'good' films are insufficient. Instead, notions of relevance and use value would displace attention away from concern for exact theoretical explication of progressiveness (or whatever) supposedly immanent in texts, towards a historically and culturally specific analysis paying due attention to relations of production and consumption, audience composition, problems of reference, and so forth. It is precisely on this terrain of wider social relations that the significance of national film cultures might be gauged.

² Rod Stoneman and Hilary Thompson (eds), *The New Social Function of Cinema. Catalogue British Film Institute Productions 1979-80*, London, BFI, 1981.

Nationalism, National Identity and the Left

The problematic of nationality/nationalism/national identity (plus all the attendant 'isms' currently so potent) has always embarrassed the left. Historically, no doubt this is partly ascribable to Marx's failure to elaborate any adequate theory of nationalism and the nation state, and later Marxists' suspicion that the primacy and internationalism of the class struggle could not but be undermined by bourgeois national sentiments – indeed it was usually assumed that the expansion and development of capitalism would anyway undermine the significance of nation states. If Lenin took a more flexible and pragmatic view, this has only issued in the frequent appropriation of nationalism by the left for opportunistic and tactical reasons. However, other work has been more sympathetic: for example, EP Thompson's appeals to national traditions of dissent and protest, or Tom Nairn's insistence that far from restricting capitalist expansion, nationalism is a direct correlative of uneven economic development, and therefore, inescapably, a fundamental topic

³ Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism. The Celtic Fringe in British National Development*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975. See also Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, London, Verso, 1981.

⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, London, Hutchinson, 1975. Michael Hechter, op cit.

⁵ Alan O'Shea, 'Trusting the People: How Does Thatcherism Work?', *Formations of Nation and People*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, pp 19-24.

for historical analysis.

An important part of this work has been recognition that uneven development occurs inside, as well as between, nation states. This, broadly speaking, derives from dominant groups within an emerging state systematically politically and economically disenfranchising other groups. In other words, instead of the nation state internally diffusing homogeneity, it produces a series of 'internal colonies'.³ While the exact nature of the colonial relationship is historically and geopolitically specific, a general relationship of dominant core to powerless peripheries obtains. Nationalism(s) simultaneously represents an ideology of the core to identify peripheries with itself, and of the peripheries in response to colonisation (an ideology for mobilisation of struggle).

It is not my intention to explicate, or analyse in depth, theoretical approaches to nationalism. Rather, I am concerned with the utilisation of the term in 1980s Britain. However, and very briefly, the general view taken here recognises its psychological dimension along the lines of Weber's 'community of sentiment', but insists that such sentiments would not persist over time were there not real social-structural and stable symbolic operations constantly reconstructing and reformulating individuals' personal and collective identities.⁴ National identity is made up of an ambiguous pattern of linguistic, cultural and historical determinants of social and individual classifications. Such classifications do not equate with a pre-given, always already forged subject of nationhood, but operate within sites of incessant struggle as ideology moves to close down national identity in terms of authentic ideal essences. These struggles can be explicitly and progressively opened up. In terms of direct political engagement in '80s Britain, the key issues on this terrain seem to be 'core' struggles to interrupt imperialist and racist conceptions of nationalism, and disarticulating 'one-nation' rhetoric, while for the peripheries, direct demands for political and cultural self-determination without embracing a trans-class/sex/race *Volksgeist* – without homogenising national interest.

Central to the Thatcherist new nationalism has been a double disarticulation of structural heterogeneity. In one direction has been an emphasis on 'natural' rights and freedoms of individuals – to achieve, to safeguard family, personal wealth, property, etc. This supposedly anti-Statist individualism extends to individual businesses and industries, all of which must be liberated, as far as possible, from governmental interference and control. However such *laissez-faire* has been accompanied by a crisis of legitimation as hegemony based on a consensus of welfare and equality has been checked by movement towards coercion, hardship and increased inequality. What has proved necessary is a mythology of 'one nation' recruited to rebuild a communality which effaces fissures in the society. That mythology moulds a network of overlapping elements – traditionalism, nostalgia, xenophobia, hostility to bureaucracy, etc – into the common sense new 'realism' and new 'national pride'.⁵ It is so potent and unyielding because its foundation is independent of any argument over its moral or intellectual legitimacy. Whether or not feelings of

individual/national superiority, pride, and ambition, are reasonable, it is held that such feelings do instinctively obtain—that is how people are—and cannot be intellectually eradicated or legislated away. In other words, and in Humean terminology, ‘passions’, by virtue of innate compulsion, must take precedence over ‘reasons’.⁶

Thatcherism’s success has been not so much dissolving factional interests to personal interest and rebuilding a communality at the level of one nation, but in setting this as the agenda for political debate. It is important to remember that Thatcherism has not simply been imposed from the top, but represents a highly specific mobilisation of a repertoire of elements in popular feelings. At a moment of extreme economic and social instability, such a mobilisation resonates with the intense need to sustain what Giddens calls ‘ontological security’, that is, it helps individuals make sense of their social lives, precisely when that social life is under attack.⁷ Ironically many of the elements of popular feelings presented in Thatcherism—antipathy to bureaucratic inefficiency, dissatisfaction with the welfare state and other state bodies, complaints against undemocratic trade union and political operations, etc—are also central to left demands for greater accountability and greater democratic participation. Despite the institutional left’s resigned acceptance of the new nationalism (witness the shameful failure during the Malvinas adventure), it has by and large failed to recognise and mobilise disaffection in politically progressive directions. Why is this and what may be done about it? At one level it reflects a certain ahistoricism, a failure to develop contemporary political strategies in response to apprehension of cultural shifts rather than in response to power struggles and/or theoretical debate. Inasmuch as socialism constitutes a theoretical method and an (intellectual) political platform, rather than an emotional appeal to tradition and popular feelings, it has failed to compete with right-wing appropriation of those feelings.⁸ There are, however, clear signs that this is changing:

*It has gradually dawned on the left... [that] the possibility that the crisis may now be seized, and shaped so as to create favourable conditions for an advance towards socialism, is inextricably linked with the deepening of democratic life, and a widening of popular democratic struggles.*⁹

If the left is to wrench popular sensibilities away from Thatcherism it will need to disengage socialism from labourism and simplistic (class) dogma and forge alignments with other struggles—the woman’s movement, ethnic groups, gay action, CND, etc—as well as taking nationalism seriously. Nationalism is central to Thatcherism in that it vindicates a programme transcending other interests; therefore it is insufficient to concentrate energy on other, already active political groupings, hoping that Thatcherism *per se* will go away of its own accord. At the same time it is important to resist the implication that nationalism ‘exists’, that it is a natural ‘passion’. What is necessary is a rearticulation of more vital, progressive and flexible notions of nationalism.

⁶ Martin Barker, *The New Racism*, London, Junction Books, 1981.

⁷ Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, London, Macmillan, 1981, chapter 8. Also his *Central Problems in Societal Theory*, London, Macmillan, 1979, chapter 3.

⁸ Patrick Wright, ‘A Blue Plaque for the Labour Movement’, *Formations of Nation and People*, op cit, pp 42-65.

⁹ Stuart Hall, ‘Popular Democracy vs Authoritarian Populism. Two ways of “taking Democracy Seriously”’, in A Hunt (ed), *Marxism and Democracy*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980, pp 157-185.

¹⁰ John Caughie, 'Scottish Television: What Would It Look Like?', in Colin McArthur (ed), *Scotch Reels*, London, BFI, 1982, pp 112-122. Caughie's purpose in holding on to both horns of the dilemma is to retain a place for naturalism as a television form inasmuch as it offers textual stability and broad readability. For a discussion of this centering on Gramsci's concept of 'National-Popular', see David Forgacs, 'National-Popular: Genealogy of a Concept', in *Formations of Nation and People*, op cit, pp 83-98.

¹¹ See, for example, Hugh Cunningham, 'The Language of Patriotism', *History Workshop Journal* 12, Autumn 1981, pp 8-33.

¹² Kenneth O Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982.

One of the basic features of this would be a critical resiting of struggles and contradictions in a national context, as well as a recognition of trans-national aspects of these in order to avoid national myopia. It is important to hold both aspects together. Both for core and peripheries it is urgent to shift definitions of nationalism away from a monolithic 'one nation' towards an awareness of a plurality of overlapping and competing discourses within which individuals and groups identify themselves and others in different ways at different times. Such unfixing of national identity obviates subordination of class, sexual, or racial difference to national ones, emphasising that disarticulation of a one nation rhetoric does not collapse back to a four nation rhetoric. The practical danger of this process of unfixing is that a constant flux offers no stable position of political coherence. So the task becomes not simply one of unfixing, but also of constantly reformulating for political and cultural ends.¹⁰ It is precisely here that national film cultures have a significant role: to reclaim historical moments of struggle and reinsert them into contemporary debate; to initiate debate on policy and strategy between and within diverse organisations; and to generate understandings of political and social contradictions. In other words, national film cultures must participate in the (ceaseless) process of making, and re-making, national identity as provisional configurations and understandings change, and within and for different (mutable) constituencies.

If a crucial task facing the British left is to prise apart the apparent identification of Thatcherism and nationalism/patriotism, a certain leverage is offered by focusing on moments when such identification has not obtained.¹¹ An alternative history of nationalism, excavating its radical and oppositional complexion, urgently needs to be constructed and promulgated. Instead of imperialist traditions of Great Britain, nationalism needs to become re-associated with struggles for liberty, individual freedom, and active democracy. To the extent that the peripheral nations have always stood in oblique relationship to dominant ideology, they could provide a significant cutting edge against Thatcherism. True, the anti-colonial slant has often reduced to an essentialist notion of people whose communality bridged the major cleavages in society, and there are profound distinctions to be drawn between the nationalisms of the four countries (indeed inside them), but in recent years there has been movement towards more adequate conceptions of nationalism. In Scotland and Wales, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru both sloughed off bourgeois republicanism in the soul-searching following devolution defeats. This has perhaps been most apparent in Wales, where the 80 per cent no vote forced a major re-evaluation of cultural-linguistic nationalism, and prompted siding with popular political traditions, themselves becoming radicalised through experience of economic and industrial decline.¹² The political situation in Ireland is clearly too complex to enter into here: in the North it is marked by what could easily be designated as anti-nationalism, while in the South, nationality and nation state coincide. Yet here too nationalism/republicanism is inflected with a sharper political edge (the adopted

designation, Sinn Féin – The Workers' Party, for example). The political potency of these shifts is less their signalling the incipient fragmentation of the nation state, than the opportunity offered to challenge Thatcherism: the opportunity to develop, practically, new notions of nationalism and national identity, and within this context, for film cultures to define themselves in politically progressive ways.

Contexts and Constituencies

Within peripheral nations, clear opportunities exist for film cultures to align themselves with other organisations, co-operating with them in wider political and cultural endeavour. This would facilitate a conspicuous escape from aestheticised apolitical conceptions of culture inasmuch as film cultural groupings would be consciously dependent on those alignments to invest their work with meaning and relevance. In other words, these groups would stand in a relationship of 'dependency' to a series of constituencies which would provide 'audiences' and, more significantly, forums for debate. At the same time, given the explicit overlap of interests between film and other organisations, film texts would no longer constitute artefacts to be consumed, but raw material to be worked on, criticised, and hopefully put to use. Obviously, such a process would not be unrealisable outside peripheral nations, but it seems probable that, to the extent that peripheral film cultures prioritise work on and around national identity, these alignments would be entered into not only of necessity, but also with facility. This outline of a new model of a film culture is along the lines of that developed during the '70s, in large part by the Independent Film-makers Association.¹³ What I want to suggest is that, for various reasons, it has now become problematised, but that the specific cultural and political configurations within peripheral nations might begin to offer a way of thinking through the problem. I want therefore to offer a necessarily brief and perhaps somewhat tendentious overview of recent history of British independent film culture, in order to introduce specific consideration of potentiality inside peripheries.

The basic assertion is this: during the 1980s, possibly due to Channel 4's funding and exhibition of a wide range of British independent work, models and strategies for a progressive film culture developed during the previous decade have become unstable. That theoretical infrastructure perhaps always had a tendency towards formalism, explication of text-based meaning and immanent analysis. However, there remained always the safety net of parallel attempts to construct (the theoretical outlines of) new social relations of cinema in terms of an 'integrated practice'¹⁴. A progressive film culture was recognised as depending upon rejection of conceptions of cinema as commercial/cultural artefacts, as finished products with fixed meanings to be consumed by an audience largely undifferentiated in terms of class, sex or race. Instead of meaning residing in texts, or (slightly more satisfactorily) being offered to

¹³ *The New Social Function of Cinema*, op cit.

¹⁴ See, for a history of IFA policy, Simon Blanchard and Sylvia Harvey, 'The Post-War Independent Cinema – Structure and Organisation', in James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds), *British Cinema History*, op cit, pp 226-241.

¹⁵ Don Macpherson (ed), *Traditions of Independence*, London, BFI, 1980.

¹⁶ The quote is from an ACTT booklet on the Workshop Declaration, published June, 1984.

¹⁷ But see the discussion between Jonathan Curling and Felicity Oppé, *Screen*, Jan-Feb, 1983, vol 24 no 1, pp 53-61.

¹⁸ Stephen Lambert, *Channel 4: Television with a Difference*, London, BFI, 1982. More specifically on S4C, Owen Edwards, 'Reaching Beyond the Ratings', the *Listener*, July 26, 1984. *Aspects of RTE Television Broadcasting*, Dublin, Citizens for Better Broadcasting, 1975. Both the S4C and the CBB debates were located in cultural-linguistic questions, S4C via Plaid Cymru, and the CBB being an offshoot of Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League).

audiences positioned by texts, it was seen to be produced by audiences also drawing on a whole series of extra-textual discourses in particular institutional contexts. If meanings are not specifically textually located, audiences can 'make sense' of texts in different ways, in different circumstances. Therefore energy was put into creating new conditions of reception to facilitate interrogation of texts for use by specific audiences. At the same time production activity aimed to be directly responsive to the cultural needs of those audiences.

The development of IFA policy in a sense exemplified these trends. Independence became defined not just in terms of funding and production arrangements, or aesthetic radicalism, but in also recognising a responsibility to meet the cultural needs of, and create a dialogue with, specific constituencies. This stress on the social was not novel—the precedent of, for example, workers' film groups during the 1930s was clearly relevant to contemporary efforts to put film to use; to not only make politically 'adequate' films, but to create new social relations for such work.¹⁵

In many ways, the situation has changed radically with the advent of Channel 4, massive new audiences, and vastly increased funding. In particular, the Workshop Declaration has shifted definitions of independence towards notions of particular labour relations in production. While a general commitment 'to develop audiences, research, education and community work in the widest sense' remains, it is difficult to see how this will operate as production becomes firmly disengaged from other activity.¹⁶ This is not to knock Channel 4, nor is it to suggest a sell-out by independent programme producers to the evil tube with its millions of private viewers (homogenised and lobotomised). My concern is the extent to which questions of the social relations of television have been adequately addressed *vis-à-vis* independent film and the concept of 'integrated practice' abandoned.¹⁷ Perhaps what is really at stake is the extent to which an ideology of 'broad'casting (to an undifferentiated public), has begun, almost unacknowledged, to become established. This must be challenged—not in the sense of producing more programmes for 'minorities' and scheduling them in non-ghettoised slots, but in creating the conditions that those programmes might genuinely intervene in and be taken up within those minorities' struggles.

National and regional cultural identity might provide a framework for reconsideration of the social relations of television, as well as offering a political point of intervention into institutions. The successful insistence on a specifically Welsh Channel 4, containing a significant Welsh language component, or the Citizens for Better Broadcasting campaign which repulsed proposals for retransmitting BBC1 in Southern Ireland instead of an indigenous RTE2 have help fragment the ideology of broadcasting.¹⁸ Nationalism, potentially at least, provides a focus for efforts to construct a more socially responsible television service because control over media representations and values are central planks of any nationalist manifesto (embodying an awareness that 'forging' a nation is posited on debates on national past, present and future within a range of

institutions and cultural groupings).

Building a useful and relevant film and TV culture requires fusing sensitivity to the dialectics of national 'interest'/national heterogeneity with the need to synthesise a new 'integrated practice' of television and film and their systems (and potential systems) of production, distribution and consumption.

It must be admitted that, apart from one or two tentative initiatives, movement towards a new integrated practice in the peripheries has remained more declarative than real, with production remaining almost completely independent of exhibition and debate, and ('popular') criticism aloof altogether. In Scotland, for example, efforts by the magazine *Cencrastus*, the Glasgow Film and Video Workshop and Edinburgh's Third Cinema to galvanise debate over Scottish film culture have been of limited impact, with film-makers largely ignoring them. The paltry attendances at the sessions on film workshops in Scotland during the 1984 Edinburgh Film Festival was symptomatic. There are however signs of movement (study courses, commercial screening of significant Scottish material) which might be accelerated by other debates, say, over the role and function of Clyde Cablevision, or over the declared intention of the new Labour controlled Edinburgh Council to develop policies for 'popularising' the arts.

It is perhaps in Southern Ireland that the problems of creating a national cinema have been most consciously addressed: by film-makers interrogating their society and history (the work of Pat Murphy and Bob Quinn stand out here), while simultaneously insisting on new contexts for exhibition and consumption.¹⁹ At the same time, due in no small part to the Arts Council prioritising film work, and its policy of funding appointments in key institutions, a network of film workers, educationalists, and theoreticians has developed; a network, moreover, which is not artificially isolated from production concerns.

In practical terms, considerations of integrated practice usually turn upon calls for film workshops – workshops being seen as local centres for production of relevant and responsible material, as well as sites for potential intersection of various cultural, social and political concerns.²⁰ Discussion of workshops reflects back on previous comments about movement of independent film culture towards a more production and exhibition oriented role. Despite this – or perhaps, inasmuch as defining film culture in terms of film production is still common, because of it – demands for workshops in peripheral nations have been growing in recent years.²¹ This has been most visible in Scotland. Demands for Scottish (and other) workshops does not indicate a hopelessly utopian blindness to their limitations, failings, and contradictory position, but a slight optimism that the already existing and potential dynamics of peripheral nations might offer a framework of supporting structures wherein workshops could fulfil significant social and cultural roles.

With the exception of the largely production based Chapter Film Workshop in Cardiff, there are no established, state-institution funded workshops outside England. The reasons for this are complex, and vary

¹⁹ See, for instance, the comments by Bob Quinn and Joe Comerford, *Film Directions*, vol 2 no 5, 1978, where they argue that film-makers' responsibilities do not stop with the finished product. Quinn: 'Our action in making films is a political and social action, and that has to be carried through to the political and social reality which is a live audience...'

²⁰ The definition of words such as 'local', 'regional' and 'national', is always contingent on practical considerations and hence always provisional.

²¹ Demands for a devolution of cultural production always accompany demands for a responsible national film culture. But it cannot be assumed that indigenous production is a Good Thing, nor that it is necessarily 'in tune' with its surrounding environment. Contrast the work of London-based Cinema Action in Wales (*So That You Can Live*) with the often farcical history of Ireland's Ardmore Studios, and its attempts at international productions.

²² 'The Grierson Influence', *Undercut*, Summer 1983, no 9, particularly the comments by Claire Johnston and Alan Lovell.

²³ Wil Aaron, 'Film', *The Arts in Wales*, Cardiff, Welsh Arts Council, 1979, pp 297-308.

²⁴ Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, London, Fontana, 1981.

²⁵ Liz Curtis, *Ireland: The Propaganda War*, London: Pluto Press, 1984. Also, *The British Media and Ireland*, booklet produced by the Campaign for Free Speech on Ireland, London.

²⁶ Colin McArthur, 'Scotland and Cinema: The Iniquity of the Fathers', in *Scotch Reels*, op cit. McArthur's comment is polemical rather than literally inclined, but it does point to a real isolation from debates, during the 1960s and 1970s, which animated film culture in other countries.

²⁷ For comments on *Film Directions* see Kevin Rockett, op cit. Also Kevin Rockett, 'Has Film Direction a Policy?', *Film Directions*, vol 2 no 5, 1978.

²⁸ For a critique of this position, see the correspondence between John Brown and Colin McArthur, *Glasgow Herald*, July, 1982. For more extended analyses of

from one country to another, as well as signalling rampant Anglo-centrism; however, several general comments might be in order. Historically it is possible to point to a moral conservatism and a suspicion of all but the most traditional aesthetics. In Scotland, puritanism met film culture in the worthy seriousness of Griersonianism and the traditions of documentary. While Griersonianism had a profound impact throughout the British Isles in general, it is perhaps in Scotland that its influence has been most durable.²²

It is not so much documentary forms at stake here (that debate has been well aired) but the ambition of the Griersonian realist aesthetic to promulgate information from a centre outwards, and which succeeded in isolating film-making from popular forms – from both art and entertainment. In Wales, cinema fell under the withering gaze of sabbatarianism and the chapel, and is 'still regarded with suspicion in the Welsh establishment'.²³ In Southern Ireland, the power of the Catholic Church, plus post-treaty romanticised conceptions of national distinctiveness, led to a deep distrust of anything intimating modernism or cosmopolitan tendencies.²⁴ In the North, armed conflict has generated an official nervousness about all forms of media activity which might escape censorship.²⁵ While, with the exception of Northern Ireland, such impulses have lost a good deal of their force, it has meant that debates around film in these countries have been late starters, and it remains true that institutions have kept their faces turned to narrow, apolitical views of film culture, with emphases on products and audiences. Colin McArthur's observation that the Scottish Film Council has failed to engage with discourses of modernism and Marxism might have some wider applicability.²⁶

Southern Ireland witnessed money being poured into Ardmore for international co-productions, to the virtual exclusion of independent work and other conceptions of film culture. Only its 1982 bankruptcy allowed such conceptions to come into prominence and influence the policy of the Irish Film Board (established at the same time). It also created a new climate for activity on other fronts, particularly galvanising the almost moribund Irish Film Institute (until 1982 known as the National Film Institute of Ireland). To faithfully represent the situation in the North requires acknowledgement that it labours under intense financial disadvantages. But it must be said that institutionally it remains trapped in auteurism and apoliticism – exemplified by the sub-*Sight and Sound* policy of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland film journal, *Film Directions*.²⁷

In Scotland, film culture continues to be institutionally identified with film-making – and as near as possible to commercial/feature film-making – to the exclusion of other conceptions.²⁸ Indeed, the constant reiteration of the absolute distinction between the Scottish Film Council and the Scottish Film Production Fund makes it difficult to envisage how a more broadly conceived film culture might be achieved. However, the constant drip of criticism, which might turn to steady pressure if the fledgling Scottish Association of Workshops gets its act together (with

progressive, like-minded national organisations, the ACTT, etc), coupled with the jolt to complacency administered when the Scottish Arts Council reduced its contribution to the FPF by £20,000, at least offers a purchase on change. In Wales, the two bodies most intimately connected with film followed intriguingly different routes. While the Welsh Arts Council, to its credit, adopted a policy supporting development of film workshops as centres for general film activity²⁹, the Bwrdd Ffilmiau Cymraeg (Welsh Film Board) remains locked in a conservative cultural-linguistic paradigm, inherently hostile to alignments within a progressive Welsh nationalism. It has tended to define its role simply in terms of language preservation via use in film, and not moved far beyond an exclusively production-based philosophy.

Institutionally, film activity in peripheral nations has only recently begun to escape the conservative and reactionary thinking which has failed to adequately conceptualise the inter-relation of different aspects of a film culture. Some have moved further than others, but a recognition of the potential role of peripheral cultural politics in forging new conceptions of nationality and new paradigms for film culture underlines how far they have still to go.

Production, History and Film Culture

So far, this article has looked at cultural and institutional contexts wherein national film cultures might develop. This does not indicate a complete rejection of formal questions. While it is difficult to make a convincing case for a progressive film culture isolated from and unrecognised by audiences, for a radicalism defined ultimately in terms of textual operations rather than interventions in social contexts, this does not displace responsibility from investigation of forms which might more adequately serve the needs of those audiences. (This is not to posit a truth located somewhere in class/national experience which can be/must be reflected back in a radical cultural politic; but without purchase on social experience it is hard to see how cultural strategies can generate understandings and hence participate in activity.) Such forms cannot be theoretically elaborated on *a priori* grounds, nor do historical, social, or political realities automatically generate appropriate textual strategies; they must develop from conscious struggle to satisfactorily express aspects of personal and social experience, of wants and aspirations. For a national film culture the task is to construct forms and textual strategies capable of articulating and circulating popular memory³⁰, and of participating in production of new political and cultural identities. This task has been blocked by a tendency to prioritise abstract generic and stylistic considerations over questions of meaning and value. Without denying the importance of generic referentiality in, say, generation of pleasure, or production of meaning, it is useless in itself as an evaluative concept.

Yet often notions such as tradition, genre, and style are elevated to

the Scottish situation, especially as discussed at the 1982 and 1983 Edinburgh Film Festivals, see: David Will, 'Scotch Reels at Edinburgh', *Framework*, 20, 1983, and 'New Images of Scotland', *Cencrastus*, 15, 1984. Also, Steve McIntyre, 'New Images of Scotland', *Screen* Jan-Feb 1984, vol 25 no 1, pp 53-59.

²⁹ See the Welsh Arts Council annual report, 1977.

³⁰ *Edinburgh '77 Magazine*, 'History/Production/Memory'. As developed there the concept of popular memory is distorted by the idealism and virulent anti-empiricism then current.

³¹ For instance, the argument that Wales suffers a historical deficit in visual and musical arts, but that this is counterbalanced by oral traditions of story telling and 'the Welsh colour sense': Dr Glyn Tegai Hughes, 'Television and the Arts', address to the North Wales Arts Association, September, 1981. Also see *A Seat Among the Stars: The Cinema and Ireland*, Channel 4 booklet to accompany Channel 4/UTV series, April-May, 1984, wherein an authentic affinity is held to exist between the Irish and Cinema.

³² For a critique of the influence of this tradition see Marcus, op cit. Rockett, 1978, op cit, indicates an alternative literary tradition stretching from Joyce to Beckett and even Flan O'Brien, largely ignored by film-makers.

³³ For discussion of representations of Scotland, see *Scotch Reels*, op cit. For Ireland, and an account of alternatives, Luke Gibbons, 'Lies that Tell the Truth: Maeve, History and Irish Cinema', the *Cranebag*, vol 7 no 2, 1983. Also Kevin Rockett, 'Irish Cinema. Notes on Some Nationalist Fictions', *Screen*, Winter 1979/80, vol 20 nos 3/4, pp 115-123.

precisely this status, enticing film-makers, and impoverishing film criticism. In peripheral nations, because of historically low levels of production, reference points are not necessarily filmic. A further complication is that the search for a past is sometimes not merely for evaluative criteria, but for traditions which simultaneously act as guarantees of national authenticity.³¹ Even when not contaminated by essentialism, identifying films as moments in a cultural/historical continuum militates against their assessment according to more forceful criteria. In Ireland, for example, literary traditions of story telling have tended to dominate film-making and heavily weight film criticism – from *The Informer* and *The Quiet Man* to *Cal* and *The Company of Wolves*³².

However, while it is inappropriate to look to the past for traditions and precedents for contemporary cultural strategies, there is one area of historical investigation crucial to peripheral national film cultures – representation. To over-simplify, the 'Celtic fringes' have been romanticised and symbolically excluded from contemporary society: from John Ford's mythical Ireland and Wales, to Ealing representations of Scotland, to current treatment of 'the Irish question', the 'Celt' is shown as irrationally incapable of coping with the modern world. Detailed examination of these traditions is necessary to uncover how such representations operate in order that they may be challenged, in order that alternatives may be constructed.³³

Notwithstanding this, the general point still obtains – the search for a national voice does not open onto a search for a historically validated particular style or form. Although it is possible that construction of a national film culture would issue in specific formal directions, this would be contingently, out of certain substantive ambitions which determine what is 'spoken', as well as how to 'speak'.

What to speak? A central task for a national film culture must be to 'make sense' of the conditions of that nation, and of the forces that shape it, relating these to the experiences at the micro level that make up our everyday lives. Neither historical nor contemporary events have automatic 'meaning', still less cultural or political significance. Even though the dominant view of history is of 'one damn thing after another', it is held together, granted significance – again the dominant view – through discourses of tradition which link past to future via an unbroken continuum of 'Nation'; history becomes tradition and becomes fixed in a conservative mould. A progressive national film culture must challenge this ahistorical history, resurrecting (without refixing) past struggles and inserting them into contemporary debate. It must inject a new coherence that accommodates complexity, contradiction and change. A national film culture must constantly engage with national past and present, opening out questions of meaning, and articulating aspirations of constituent groups.

A complex network of formal strategies and contextual orientations would be necessary for the circulation and mobilisation of these debates – strategies and networks developed in practice, not stipulated in advance, or derived from the past.

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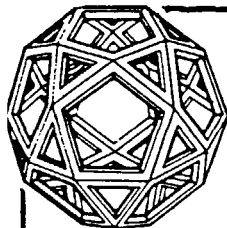
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BRITISH FILM REVIEWING

A COMPLAINT BY
COLIN McARTHUR

There is a certain account of British life which has agitated the left in recent years, the cluster of adjectives deployed often including insular, secretive, empiricist and anti-theoretical. The picture is drawn of a particular class or caste exercising power through claims to natural leadership with a consequent distaste, certainly for polemic, but also for simply making explicit the bases on which its policies are erected and its decisions made.

The institution of reviewing is sometimes regarded as monolithic and unchanging. It is perhaps more accurate to conceive of it as a relatively continuous core with putatively progressive changes occurring on the peripheries. Thus, around the core of the Fleet Street quality dailies and weeklies and weekly periodicals such as the *New Statesman* and the *Spectator* there has grown up over the last decade or so a series of peripheries offering the promise (and, less evenly, the actuality) of more progressive reviewing. These diverse peripheries include the listings press (*City Limits* and *Time Out*); the music/youth culture press (*New Musical Express*, *The Face*)—an increasing force in attracting particular audiences to particular films; and a handful of monthly periodicals, the most important of which is the British Film Institute's *Monthly Film Bulletin*. All of these are eccentric *vis-à-vis* film reviewing in the sense that their progressiveness stems from the knowledge and enthusiasm of particular reviewers rather than from the cultural policies of the journals themselves. Indeed, it is instructive to see the extent to which progressive reviewing practices entered the *MFB* as a result of a change in editorial staff, a local example of the wider struggle between radical and conservative tendencies in the BFI which has been going on for over two decades.

It is important to mention, in the context of these peripheries, the lamentable failure of left

periodicals such as *Marxism Today* and *New Socialist* to operate a sustained, as opposed to intermittent, engagement with cinema and television. As with so much else, Gramscian ideas about the political centrality of culture seem beyond the scope of the orthodox left in Britain.

Despite these uneven flurries on the peripheries, continuing agenda-setting power over the terms in which cinema is consumed in Britain remains with the Fleet Street nexus and their clones in television. It is they, above all, who require interrogating when questions about film reviewing are posed.

In the role fulfilled by film reviewers in British life, this model is writ large, though one is tempted to say 'writ small' so low is the public profile offered by British film reviewers both individually and collectively. They are simply there, part (albeit a minor one) of the fabric of what a quality newspaper 'naturally' is.

You would be hard put to find a public statement by any British film reviewer as to what he/she considers his/her function since that is not the kind of thing the British go in for. However, deductions from the shape of a characteristic film column and conversations with the incumbents would suggest that their main role is that of consumers' guides to new movies or, put in a way perhaps more congenial to the reviewers themselves, as informed guides to what is worthwhile in the week's releases. Now this definition of their function is so natural, or, more accurately, naturalised, that it needs some effort of mind to stand back from it and ask why it should be so. It is built into the very structure of the reviewer's working life, by and large press shows early in the week and the column later in the week.

There are powerful vested interests involved in sustaining this definition of the film columnist's role (the very title 'reviewer', or even 'critic', is

80 predicated upon such a definition). Certainly, this is the role the film trade, both distributors and exhibitors, both mainline Wardour Street and the independents, wish film columnists to fulfil, the payoff for them being the delivery both of readers to the box-office and gobbets of copy which can be used in follow-up advertising. The symbiotic relationship between reviewers and trade is worthy of some investigation because, particularly in the independent sector, it can have a crucial, determining effect on what is imported to the UK, shown in cinemas and, in certain cases, what enters the canon of 'film classics' thereafter to run in film societies and cinemas with some concern for 'the art of the film'. It is likely that the sharply escalating costs involved in acquiring and opening films in the UK will have strengthened this tendency. It is not unusual, at foreign film festivals such as Cannes or Berlin, for independent distributors/exhibitors to be seen, immediately after screenings, heading for the key reviewers of the British heavy press to find out their reactions to particular films. The question 'If I buy this film, will you give it a good review?' is rarely put so bluntly, but the intention is the same. This factor, the influencing of what is seen in British cinemas (and on British television), and the constituting of 'classics', is one of the major sources of the reviewers' hidden power.

The other major source is less tangible, though no less real: the power, week after week, to define the terms in which cinema is discussed and understood. Mike Poole has written extensively on the predominantly literary formation of British television reviewers.¹ His argument would hold good, by and large, for British film reviewers too. Two examples, taken at random, will illustrate the consequences of this as well as indicating the characteristic consumer guide shape of the British film column. Those of the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer* of September 30, 1984, are almost uncannily similar, to the point of giving over their major space to the same two films (*The Bounty* and *The Bostonians*) in the same order and in the same terms, an account of character and performance. The fact that the *Observer's* reviewer is more knowledgeable and perceptive

about cinema and its history is, from the point of view of this argument, irrelevant, the crucial point being that both reviewers share the same conception and definition of their roles. Indeed, at one point in his column the *Observer's* reviewer writes:

... Any other week than this, I would have happily devoted my whole column to the reissue of Hitchcock's *Rope* and Terence Davies' *Film Trilogy*...

The argument implicit in these lines is, of course, that there are two new, major films opening this week and that these must take pride of place in the column. That is, the submerged iceberg of the consumers' guide model is being glimpsed. The question is whether reviewers subscribe to this definition of their role or whether they conceive of their role differently and are under pressure to act as consumers' guides. In conversation, some reviewers hint darkly at editorial pressure of this order (the sanction the film trade has is its capacity to withdraw advertising from the press) but it is doubtful if the film columns would be substantially different without this pressure, so naturalised has the existing order become.

There are, then, wide disparities in conscientiousness and insight from one film reviewer to another, but all (and this goes right across the UK political spectrum from the *Daily Telegraph* to the *Morning Star*) share the same conception of what a film column should do, essentially to offer an entertaining guide to the week's releases which tend to get discussed partly in terms of plot summary, partly in literary terms of character. There are often marks given to particular members of the cast or technical staff for their contributions and there is, nowadays, an orthodoxy which locates overall artistic control with the film's director. Oddly, this marks an advance on the situation of a decade ago when the orthodoxy of the film columns of the heavy press was to celebrate directorial artistry in foreign (i.e. non-English speaking) films and deny it (with a few notable directorial exceptions) in British and American films. The fact that even the most hack reviewers of the heavy press and of television now have some (however garbled) notion of what an *auteur* is marks what was probably the last time the critical/theoretical *avant-garde* in the UK

¹ See, for example, 'The Cult of the Generalist - British Television Criticism 1936-83', *Screen* March-April 1984, vol 25 no 2, pp 41-61.

(represented in the late sixties and early seventies by *Movie* and the BFI Education Department) had any kind of effect on reviewing practice.

The essentially passive role of British film reviewers as adjuncts of the film marketing process means that they have a severely stunted notion of what film culture means. Indeed, the idea of an overall film culture would be too frenchified by half for them. For them the cinema is a collection of disparate and largely unconnected movies (although some of the better reviewers have a sense of film history and film genre). Their reviewing practice could be characterised as a series of lacunae filled by impressionistic accounts of film plots and actorial performances. Taking the above quotation from the *Observer* as a jumping off point, a case could be made that, rather than allowing the week's new films to dominate the column, a more worthwhile use of the space would have been precisely to engage with the issues the reviewer indicates have been crowded out, specifically the place of Hitchcock in film culture, the nature of the differential responses in France and the UK to his work, the place of *Rope* within the Hitchcockian *oeuvre* and how that *oeuvre* should now be seen in the light of more recent work on the cinema, particularly that emanating from psychoanalysis.² In other words, the project of the column would become the construction and transmission of knowledge rather than the display of taste and consumer guidance. A project of this kind, however, relating to Hitchcock would bring the British reviewer up with a bang against what is possibly the most serious lacuna in British film reviewing practice conceived in its own terms as an attention to individual movies. That lacuna is a concern with and understanding of cinematic *mise-en-scène*. This concern (*Movie*'s most valuable bequest to British film culture and regrettably absent from areas additional to British film reviewing), this awareness of the specificity of cinema, of how all the cinema's resources (camera placement and movement, lighting, decor, colour, editing, sound, the dress, movement and gestures of the players in relation to all these) unite to produce

meaning and situate audiences, has always been an absence in British film reviewing, an absence produced by the predominantly literary formation of its practitioners, by the over-hasty process of reviewing itself and by the failure of reviewers to take adequate account of more serious work on the cinema going on around them. As was suggested above, the last time the critical/theoretical avant-garde impinged on British reviewing practice was in the course of its championing of Hollywood cinema as a cinema of *auteurs* and genres in the sixties. However, quite apart from the garbled and reductive form in which the concept of *auteur* was appropriated by British film reviewers, they took only one side of the concept and that, in retrospect, the least interesting side, the recurrence of certain themes in the work of particular directors. The substantial concern with *mise-en-scène* which had informed that struggle was not taken up. Thus it is, therefore, that the prevailing sense one has of British film reviewing (even of the better sort) is of a kind of rootless, literary impressionism. It is rare indeed to find even rudimentary pointers to an analysis of how a particular scene is put together and how it works in relation to what comes before and after it. This lack in British film reviewing means that the reviewers are failing in their most basic function, to clarify for their readers the operation of cinema as cinema.

The history of the absence of a concern with *mise-en-scène* is but a dimension of a more general limitation among British film reviewers: their failure to engage with more serious (including academic) work on the cinema except on occasion to deride it. The culture as a whole suffers from the enormous gap between reviewers on the one hand and teachers and critics on the other. Very few indeed of the Fleet Street film reviewers have produced books on the cinema (Alexander Walker of the *Evening Standard*, Philip French of the *Observer* and David Robinson of the *Times* excepted) and the books which have appeared do not show an awareness of, far less an engagement with, the often contentious positions emerging out of, for example, journals like *Screen* and *Framework*, which have had far too easy a ride in one sense, attracting heavy derision but little contestation, particularly from the film reviewers.

More serious work on the cinema seems simply to bypass the reviewers. An example: in the summer of 1982 the Edinburgh International

² Symptomatically, the placing of *Rope* at the centre of a review of the month's films was precisely the strategy adopted by Peter Wollen in what is the only serious programme about the cinema currently available – *Visions* (Channel 4), October 18, 1984.

Film Festival (and here the writer must declare an interest) mounted a week-long discussion event called *Scotch Reels* with an accompanying book of essays³. The event and publication were highly polemical, denouncing the way Scotland and the Scots have been and are being constructed in film and television. One of the central strands of the argument concerned the way that Scotland, like other societies peripheral to economically and politically strong neighbours, has been constructed within the tradition of European Romanticism as a timeless, magical land which transforms everyone who comes in contact with it – *The Maggie* and *Brigadoon* being the *loci classici* of this tendency, which is nothing less than the ideological arm of economic expropriation. Less than a year later *Local Hero* appeared still peddling the same view of Scotland, albeit in cooler tones. A further crucial dimension of the argument was that Scots themselves had come to live within this

construction of Scotland, so dominant had it become in its two centuries of life. A glance over the British reviews of *Local Hero* will reveal the extent to which those crucial cultural (and ultimately political) arguments failed to register with the reviewers of the British press:

... the capitalist onslaught on the Western Scotland becomes the material for what is essentially a fairy story. I saw last week a film programme on Channel 4 which rather snootily criticised the film as an exercise in 'decontextualisation' (the structuralist word for having a good time) but that is exactly the point – when reality is touched by wonder, when people look up at the stars rather than down at their feet, when it does not matter whether they are American or Scottish, rich or poor, capitalist or peasant, human beings themselves are transformed....

– Peter Ackroyd, the *Spectator* (19.3.83)

... Forsyth presents us with a couple of dozen characters whose seemingly uncomplicated pursuance of monetary gain is gradually transformed, almost by cosmic forces, into something better – as if a long hidden side of their

³ Colin McArthur (ed), *Scotch Reels*, London, British Film Institute, 1982.



Scotland romanticised in *Local Hero*.

nature is being slowly exposed to the light of day. It is a *Brigadoon* with more properly romantic knobs on, a loving and hopeful film in otherwise very pessimistic times....

—Derek Malcolm, the *Guardian* (10.3.83)

... There is also a touch of wild natural magic about *Local Hero* close in spirit, Forsyth feels, to the motivating ideas behind *I Know Where I'm Going* and other classics by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger; trying to present the cosmic viewpoint to people but through the most ordinary things....

—Geoff Brown, the *Times* (5.3.83)

... To gentler matters. The surreptitious qualities of Bill Forsyth's *Local Hero* unfold in the mind at leisure, reminding you, each soft-selling image gentle with persuasion, that life like the film is not there to make points but to spread the enjoyment of being itself. Unhurried but never slow, this dainty selection of antics makes the whole world kin, by venturing upon no preachment or cry from the heart. It's a relief rare in the cinema to be treated as a person rather than as an audience: you feel civilized....

—David Hughes, the *Sunday Times* (13.3.83)

... Bill Forsyth's delightful but not so douce *Local Hero* is unmistakably from the magical Scottish hand that wrote and directed *That Sinking Feeling* and *Gregory's Girl*....

—John Coleman, *New Statesman* (11.3.83)

Bill Forsyth's *Local Hero* is one of those Scottish-set films... where sensible, southerly Anglo-Saxons go clinically mystical or polymorphously possessed once they cross Hadrian's Wall.... It's clear that Scotland is weaving its old black magic.... How can brute industrial materialism possibly succeed in exploiting an enchanted land?

—Nigel Andrews, *Financial Times* (11.3.83)

The problem here is the extent to which the reviewers quoted accept the construction of Scotland as a mythical, transforming land (although Nigel Andrews' ironic tone may betoken some distancing from the myth) and their unawareness of this construction's having been interrogated in *Scotch Reels*. In fairness it should be pointed out that Philip French of the *Observer* (whose suggestion it was that an event like *Scotch Reels* be set up, and who attended it) points out at the end of his review of *Local Hero* that '... at the film's heart is that tartan Shangri-la, *Brigadoon*...', but the review as a whole betrays no awareness of the politically disabling capacity of this construction in modern Scotland,

the essential political argument of *Scotch Reels*. The failure of the Fleet Street nexus to engage with the *Scotch Reels* debate is offered as an example the present writer is particularly familiar with. Numerous others might be cited; for instance the non-appearance in the Fleet Street film columns of any glimmerings of awareness of the sharp debate in the feminist presses about 'stalk and slash' movies such as *Dressed to Kill*, or more generally, of recent critical/theoretical work on the construction of women in the *film noir* and the melodrama.

An acquaintanceship, then, with available serious work on the cinema is a key lacuna in British reviewing practice. This is, in some respects, the outcome of British film reviewers living within their columns, in a hermetically sealed kind of way, rather than seeing their columns as active interventions in the film (and wider) culture. As is noted above, the function of the characteristic British film column has to be deduced; there is rarely, if ever, even with a change of incumbency, a statement about what the column is there to do. New film reviewers simply 'emerge', rather as the leader of the Tory Party used to. Allied with this is the total absence of explicit commitments, policy aims and polemics. The reviewers of other arts such as literature and drama on the whole share the same broad literary formation as the film reviewers and are not markedly different in their practice and their conception of their role. Nevertheless, there is, from time to time, in some of these columns the sense of important issues being at stake, as in the celebrated polemics of Kenneth Tynan on behalf of a new kind of British theatre when he was drama critic of the *Observer*, or in the sharp exchanges between Bernard Levin and Trevor Nunn and others in the *Times* on the status of the text in drama production. One would be hard-pressed to recall letters to the heavy press taking issue with film reviewers or the latter responding publicly, far less polemic initiated in the film column itself. It is a mark of the consensus which reigns in British film reviewing that no reviewer has ever, to my knowledge, taken public issue with another in his/her column. Polemic in British film culture has come mainly from small magazines like *Sequence*, *Oxford Opinion*, *Movie*, *Brighton Film Review*, *Screen*, and others and, from time to time, from sections of the left press.

It is perhaps not generally known that British

film reviewers do indeed exist as a collectivity, in addition to the considerable *ad hoc* socialising which occurs primarily in foyers following screenings. That collectivity is the Film Section of the Critics' Circle (a suitably cosy and consensual title: 'Are you sitting comfortably?'). Membership of the Film Section is open to all film reviewers who earn their living primarily from this source and, as well as acting as a quasi-trade union (pressing for compensation for dismissed colleagues, for instance) and liaising with the film trade on the timing of press shows, its main cultural work lies in its annual awards to films and film personnel which usually occur at the time of the London Film Festival. Last year's awards were

Best English Language Film: *King of Comedy*

Best Foreign Language Film: *Yol*

Best Direction: Andrzej Wajda for *Danton*

Best Script: Ruth Praver Jhabvala for *Heat and Dust*

The Mari Kutna Award for Animation: *Night Club*

and three Special Awards: Ben Kingsley for *Gandhi*, Artificial Eye for the overall quality of its releases, Ken Wlaschin on his departure as Director of the London Film Festival.

There is nothing wrong with having awards; they can serve a very useful purpose in the politics of culture: and, aside from a certain cautiousness and orthodoxy, is there anything intrinsically wrong with the above choices? What seems strikingly absent, however – and this is wholly consonant with the prevailing impressionism of British film reviewing – is any *justification* or *explanation* of what constitutes the various kinds of excellence displayed by the recipients of the awards. Like so much else in the British film reviewing milieu (the tone of many reviews is important here) the absence of justification suggests the complicity of reviewers and readers round the proposition 'Well, we all *know* what excellence is when we see it, don't we?'

Finally, the privileging of images on screens as

opposed to other elements in the film culture in the film columns of the British press points to the serious lack of precisely that overall unifying concept of 'the film culture', that complex of practices and institutions much of which remains hidden from public view. One might ask therefore where, in the film columns of the British press are there to be found analyses of institutions such as the British Film Institute, the National Film and Television School and the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (as opposed to occasional carping about some of the things they do); of the film buying and programming policies, and the programmes about the cinema, of the broadcasting institutions; of the policies of journals such as *Sight and Sound*, *Screen* and *Framework*; of the cultural policies of the tele-cine unions, the Independent Film and Video Makers' Association and the Regional Arts Associations; of the programming policies of independent cinemas in London and elsewhere; of the film book policies of various publishers; and of developments within film education. Some of these things do not go unmentioned in the film columns of the British press, but there is no sustained attention to them, no recognition that they, as much as the images flickering on screens, constitute British film culture and, in an often complexly mediated way, having a bearing on the kinds of movies which get made and shown.

Despite variations in insight and industriousness from one reviewer to another, British film reviewing as a whole is a shabby, low-status practice which may surreptitiously influence which films get shown and which not in the UK, and which covertly reproduces dominant ways of looking at the cinema, but which has certainly had no consciousness-raising effect on British newspaper and periodical readers over the years. In the face of the yawning chasm that is British film reviewing, one might reasonably ask what it collectively considers to be its contribution to British cultural life.

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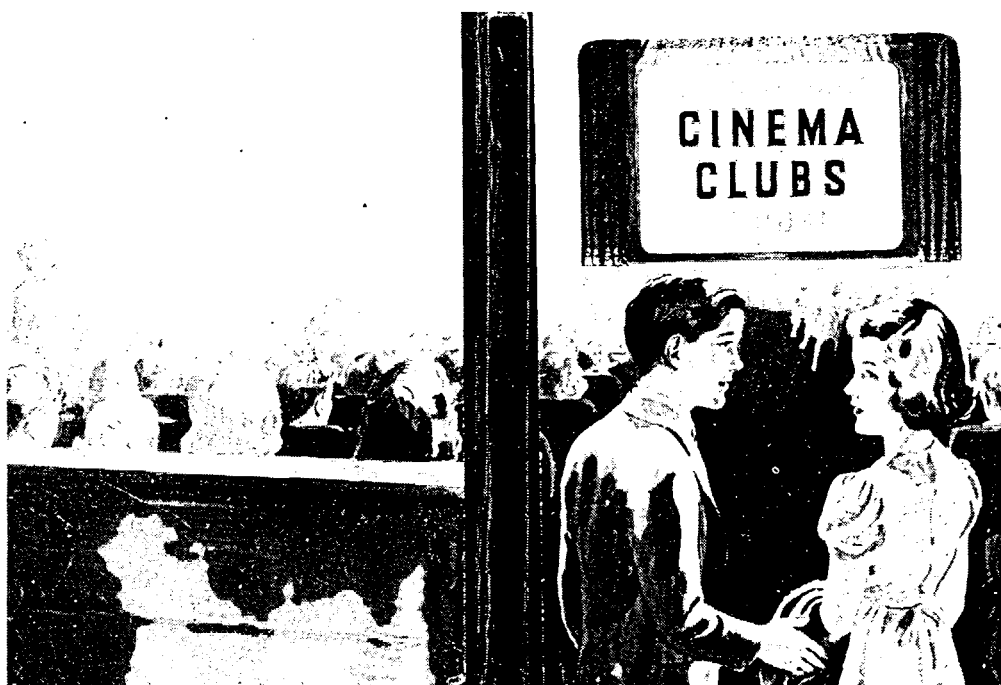
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NEVER-NEVER LAND

SIMON WATNEY EXAMINES THE CASE
FOR THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF CHILDREN'S
FICTION



SATURDAYS ARE HAPPY DAYS for a million boys and girls. Why are Saturdays happy days? Here's a riddle to which a million boys and girls will roar a joyous answer: 'Our matinees are on Saturdays!' You all know what grand entertainment these Saturday-morning film-shows are, with community singing and, on the screen, just the type of exciting film that you love—films that reflect your ideals and ambitions and satisfy your thirst for action and brave adventure.

*The Boys' and Girls' Cinema Clubs Annual, 1949*¹

Children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be easy.

*The Case of Peter Pan*²

The Case of Peter Pan hangs upon the proposition that children's fiction attempts to articulate 'an impossibility... the impossible relation between adult and child' (p 1). The relation is impossible because it presupposes an absolute distinction between childhood and adulthood. The sharp edge of this spurious

¹ Number 1, London, Juvenile Productions Ltd, 1949.

² Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, London, Macmillan, 1984, p 1. (Subsequent page references are given in the text.)

distinction is felt with particular acuteness in the address of the adult to the child in such areas of cultural production as children's literature, especially when the adult assumes the child's social position and speaking voice. In this context Peter Pan is understood as a boy who is actively prevented from 'growing up', and is effectively sentenced to eternal youth by an author whose fiction 'enacts childhood in such a way that the issue of sexuality is continually held at bay' (p4). Jacqueline Rose argues that it is a basic function of books written for children to construct an imaginary space of pure identification between adults and children. In this way the limited forms of adult identity and sexuality are projected onto children, obliterating their experience by silencing them with the loquacity of fiction. In this manner the child's threatening witness to a pre-Oedipal organisation of desire is dispelled and nullified. Childhood is thus understood throughout children's literature as a universal condition, a state of complete sexual absence, over and above the institutions of schooling and language acquisition, and without regard to differences of class, race or sex.

Hence the need for this historical analysis of the positioning of the projected adult-as-child in the discourses of children's literature. Tracing the emergence of this literature as an independent commercial publishing enterprise since the mid-eighteenth century, this study maps debates about the genre itself over contemporary theories of childhood, exemplified at two extremes in the writings of Rousseau and John Locke. The entire subsequent history of children's literature as a distinct genre is revealed as a series of mutations from, and returns to, this crucial theoretical moment, endlessly reproducing and redistributing its specific conceptualisation of childhood. From Rousseau we derive the notion that sexuality interferes with the child's 'natural' use of language as a direct means of access to some pure, unmediated knowledge of the world. From Locke we inherit the still more radical belief that language itself corrupts the supposedly spontaneous relation between childhood and the 'real'. From its outset, children's literature and other branches of specialised culture targeted at children have worked to defend the child-audience from any social or sexual complexities which might interrupt its Edenic innocence in a directly and

immediately knowable world – the 'truth' of childhood. Both theories are, of course, equally incompatible with any psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious, or of infantile sexuality.

For Rose, 'the most crucial aspect of psychoanalysis for discussing children's fiction is its insistence that childhood is something in which we continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind It persists as something which we endlessly rework in our attempts to build an image of our own history' (p 12). In other words, childhood is not to be understood as an object or a temporal period, forever disappearing on the other side of puberty and rationality. On the contrary, the very fact of our limited memory of early life 'reveals that there are aspects of our childhood which are part of our mind, a part over which we precisely do not have control, would rather forget' (p 13). In this respect the author is bracingly impatient of neo-Freudian tendencies to regard traces of childhood in adult life as symptoms of 'regression' requiring therapeutic discipline. Rather, as she writes, we should recognise that 'the neurotic simply bears witness to the effects of what is always at some level an impossible task – the task of cohering the fragmented, component and perverse sexuality of the child' (p 14). Furthermore we are reminded that 'psychoanalysis directs its attention to what cannot be spoken in what is actually being said. It starts from the assumption that there is a difficulty in language, that in speaking to others we might be speaking against ourselves, or at least against that part of ourselves which would rather remain unspoken' (p 16). Thus the inadequacy of symbolic readings of fairy-tales, or children's books or films, which proceed from the assumption of a simple one-to-one correspondence between the cultural artefact and its alleged symbolic meaning(s). Rose observes a clear complicity between the literary ideology of the fairy-tale as a vehicle for the archaic immutable 'truth' of childhood, and the ever attendant image of the child as its 'true' audience. Taking into account the emphasis which post-Saussurean linguistics has placed on question of enunciation – who speaks to whom and, by implication, why – it is hardly surprising that *The Case of Peter Pan* should also emphasise the over-insistence on the value and presence of male children, both as the subjects and ideal objects of most children's books, with the

88 honourable exception at least of E R Nesbit's late Victorian stories and novels³.

The critic Leo Bersani has pointed out that 'on the whole, psychoanalytically oriented criticism has been reductive in two aspects.'⁴ It reduces all writing to a system of sexual symbols, and 'replaces the writer with the infantile sexual organisation presumably indicated by his preferred symbols.'⁵ In this respect most Freudian cultural theory tends towards detective symbol hunting, and the establishment of the stage in childhood in which a writer is 'fixated' and to which she or he constantly 'regresses'. Jacqueline Rose is evidently well aware of these dangers, and stays well clear of any discussion of the historical author of the various texts of Peter Pan, in order not to confuse the frequently incompatible practices of psychoanalytically informed criticism, and actual psychoanalysis. Hence the significance of her analysis of debates concerning the seeming options between Fantasy and Realism which have divided theorists of children's literature in the course of the last one hundred years. These are sustained in recent debates in which fantasy is defended as an 'improving' activity, against the identical claims of realism to prepare children for the complexities of adult life.⁶ In both cases adulthood is invariably pictured and evaluated in terms of coherent, unified personalities and, above all, conventional heterosexuality.

Thus two ostensibly conflicting theories coincide in their normative aim, just as earlier theories of childhood itself agreed in the overriding ideology of 'innocence' which they invested in the notion of childhood, differing principally in their regulative policing policies. Both theories have, however, already refused one of the major emphases of contemporary psychoanalytic criticism, namely the explicit rejection of any absolute separation between the

operations of fantasy and the rest of consciousness.⁷ In a situation in which both the techniques of fantasy and of realism can equally be harnessed to repressive theories of 'normal' child development, we may safely conclude that most discussions of children's literature are in fact concerned with adults, and should be attended to as such. Jacqueline Rose suggests that we should think the category of children's literature as itself a fantasy—a fantasy of the imaginary, sex-less, a-social child, that child which is indeed seemingly father (and mother) to sexually repressed adults. Children's literature thus emerges as 'one of the central means through which we regulate our relationships to language and images as such' (p 137). She therefore invites us to understand it as a distinct institution in its own right, with its own laws, regulations and history, which cannot simply be reduced to terms deriving from other institutions (the school, the family, etc.), but which at the same time does not exist in a state of complete autonomy. For Rose the decisive observation is that 'children's fiction seems to be circumscribed by a moralism which goes far beyond the more transparent didacticism and pedagogy of its earliest modes and into the heart of writing' (p 139). This involves what she describes as 'an *ethos* of representation, characterised by its basic demand for identity in language, that is, for language as a means to identity and self-recognition' (p 139).

This is one of the most exciting arguments in her book, with its implication that how we think the possibilities of language and images in childhood bears a strong relation to how we think our selves. She states clearly that her questioning of both the theory and practice of children's literature 'does not bring with it some ideal form of writing which I am trying to promote for the child. It is a questioning of language itself as a means through which subjective identity, at the level of psychic and sexual life, is constituted and then imposed and reimposed over time' (p 140). Given the author's sophisticated analysis of the mobility and displacements of adult fantasy at work in children's fiction, I was somewhat surprised at her avoidance of the issue of adult-child sexual relations, especially in the domain of fantasy which is so central to her key text—particularly since she concurs with Freud that Desire always involves attempts to resurrect lost pleasures.

In this respect she misses what might have

³ See Alison Lurie, 'E. Nesbit: Riding The Wave of the Future', the *New York Review of Books*, October 25, 1984, vol xxxi, number 16, pp 19-23.

⁴ Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud*, University of California Press, 1977, p 3.

⁵ *ibid*, p 3.

⁶ See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, London, Peregrine, 1978.

⁷ See Victor Burgin, 'Photography, Phantasy, Function', in Victor Burgin (ed), *Thinking Photography*, London, Macmillan, 1982, pp 177-217; and Rosalind Coward, 'Sexual Violence and Sexuality', *Feminist Review* no 11, Summer 1982, pp 9-23.

been a timely opportunity to measure children's literature against contemporary anxieties concerning childhood and representations of sexuality, as exemplified in legislation concerning the alleged effects of specific films distributed on video. These issues endlessly return us to the spectacle of the vulnerable child in a manner which draws upon the ideological legacy from Rousseau and Locke about which she is so illuminating. In this context we should also require a full historical and theoretical analysis of that perceptualist bias in modern aesthetics which is as significantly underpinned by the notion of some originally innocent childhood vision – the gaze of childhood – as children's literature is underpinned by the notion of some originally innocent language of childhood.

These two areas might profitably be considered in relation to the significantly under-theorised domain of children's television and cinema. In both areas projections and displacements of adult desires organise and construct a curriculum of specific genres, in which fantasy (science fiction, animation, anthropomorphising animal fictions, etc.) interacts without any apparent discontinuity effect with realism (documentaries, travel features and so on). We should, however, note the constant positioning of the child in relation to direct addresses from privileged adult speakers, who interrupt the flow of both children's television and film in a manner which is no longer current in adult broadcasting or film practice. The extreme conservatism which characterises both areas, especially in matters of editing techniques, must also be understood beyond any transparent function of 'preparing' children for adult media literacy.

What we are considering is clearly the production of specific subjectivities, not simply in terms of subject matter, but in the look of the image itself:

Since 1943, our cinema clubs have been opening steadily up and down the country, until now there are nearly 400 thriving Odeon and Gaumont-British clubs within the J. Arthur Rank Organisation, with an average weekly attendance of some 700 boys and girls in each club. . . . The club promise of the Odeon clubs goes: 'I promise to tell the truth, to help others, and to obey my parents. I promise to be thoughtful of old folks, to be kind to animals, and always to play the game. I promise to

*try to make this country of ours a better place to live in'. . . . We try to give you all your turn. We are making entertainment films especially for boys and girls – the first time this has ever been done – and we are keeping in mind all your different requirements. . . . So, next time you see a film at your cinema-club which isn't the sort of thing that you particularly want to watch, just remember that some of the other boys and girls, your fellow-members, are really enjoying it; indeed, they may actually have asked for it.'*⁸

There isn't space in a review of this length to elucidate the various (conflicting) modes of address at work in the above text, or that with which this review is prefaced, let alone their systematic disavowals, repetitions and signifying silences. Suffice to say that what is at stake here is the simultaneous recruitment-cum-construction of a child-audience around certain regimes of pleasure, and a massive condensation of sexual, classed, and national identity.

The incorporation of *Peter Pan* into the text of Spielberg's *E.T.*, and his forthcoming film of the play itself, suggest that Jacqueline Rose's book has appeared at a particularly opportune moment for our understanding of the increasingly complex relation between the sectors of adulthood and childhood previously considered as discrete audiences. The commercial and ideological reasons behind the recent softening of this distinction await analysis. The critical confusion which surrounds the popular reception of, for example, Spielberg's films; would suggest that the supposed 'infantilism' of adult audiences masks an inability on the part of film theorists to recognise the implications of many of the arguments which Jacqueline Rose rehearses in *The Case of Peter Pan* with such timely clarity. These insist that 'children's literature cannot be understood as the passive reflection of changing values and conceptions of the child (images of childhood); instead I see it as one of the central means through which we regulate our relationship to language and images as such' (p137). Childhood experience cannot be released from the 'falsifying' constraints of adult definitions of them: the construction of adulthood in language and images must change before we will be able to hear whatever it is children are saying to us.

⁸ *The Boys' and Girls' Cinema Clubs Annual* no 1, 1949, op cit, pp 38-39.

IS THERE ANYONE HERE FROM A CLASSROOM?

AND OTHER QUESTIONS
OF EDUCATION,
BY JUDITH WILLIAMSON

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism—which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.

—Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

This comment by Marx on the opposition between a materialism which ignores subjective experience, and an idealism which recognises nothing else, seems singularly appropriate as a description of the lines which have been drawn up in current debates about education on the left. Not that the lines have been drawn up by an actual conflict between two sides—the ‘subjective’ idealists and the ‘correct-line’ materialists—rather they are drawn up by the latter group, in an imaginary confrontation with some hippy-like apparition of the ‘progressive’, ‘liberal’ educationalist: not a creature that I have ever, repeat *ever* encountered in the ranks of left-wing, Marxist, Screen-reading, Cultural-Studies-teaching semioticians amongst whom this debate is taking place. There seems absolutely no danger of an over-liberal approach sneaking into

the classrooms of these people; where then does the danger lie?

According to Ian Connell, in his article “‘Progressive’ Pedagogy?”¹, it lies in what he understands as my ‘proposals’ in ‘Girl No. 20’²—‘proposals’ which he describes as a ‘strategy for a radical enclave’ and as a *demand* that people ‘teach differently’ and ‘violently attack’ difficult students. What is revealing in this interpretation of my descriptions of classroom experience is that it attempts to derive a set of ‘proposals’ and ‘precepts’ from it, when precisely the aim of the article was to raise concrete, practical situations which do, unfortunately for us all, *challenge* many of our precepts about teaching—based as they are entirely on content and not on method. I am anxious to teach exactly the same kinds of thing that Ian Connell is—to develop and encourage an understanding of the structure and structuring of lived experience’, and that Stuart Hall refers to in the opening chapter of *Is There Anyone Here From Education?*: ‘the basic, general skills of analysis and conceptualization, of concepts and ideas and principles rather than of specific and outdated “contents”, of abstraction and generalization and categorization, *at whatever level it is possible to teach them*’.³ Few teachers on the left would dispute the importance of teaching these things; they are easy to write about at a distance from actual, diverse, unconfident, recalcitrant kids; but the question which confronts the teacher, (and, as far as I can see, *only* the teacher, since no one will talk about it) is *how* to teach these things, literally how to get them across, how to make them make sense to actual, living individuals (sorry, but they *are* individuals).

¹ Ian Connell, “‘Progressive’ Pedagogy?”, *Screen* May-June 1983, vol 24 no 3, pp 50-54.

² Judith Williamson, ‘How Does Girl No. 20 Understand Ideology’, *Screen Education* 40, Autumn-Winter 1981/82, pp 80-87.

³ Stuart Hall, ‘Education in Crisis’, in AnnMarie Wolpe and James Donald (eds), *Is There Anyone Here From Education?*, London, Pluto, 1983, p 6 (author’s italics).

All the criticisms, both direct and indirect, that have arisen from my original 'Girl No. 20' article, have one thing in common. They have proposed counter-principles, ideas on education, different abstract political strategies – but they have not offered any alternative concrete suggestions on such problems as, first, how to deal with a large group of noisy, aggressive, even violent pupils, or, second, how to persuade totally silent and withdrawn students to speak up and gain confidence. These two situations are probably the two most basic, repeated teaching problems most teachers experience in a classroom (not a University/Polytechnic seminar room) and they are precisely the situations that such writers on education as Ian Connell (in *Screen*), Valerie Walkerdine, Stuart Hall and others (*Is There Anyone Here From Education?*) have steadfastly ignored in their recent writings on education.

Since none of these people teach below University/Polytechnic degree or post-graduate level (I counted only 4 out of the 21 contributors to *Is There Anyone... who do*) it is hardly fair to complain about such an omission – obviously the debate on the politics of education stands much to gain from the ideas and intervention of those thinkers and writers who work within the more privileged sectors of the educational hierarchy. But what I want to take issue with is the dismissal by these writers of what has now become pejoratively termed 'progressivism', which supposedly (one would believe, from reading these articles) allows students to 'liberate' themselves in any way they choose, patronises them by allowing them to remain at the level of their 'street culture', hinges on the (apparently incorrect) notion that 'children are individuals who develop at different rates' and is fundamentally individualistic and reactionary. Indeed, Walkerdine manages to dismiss the word, and the whole idea of 'choice' *merely* by pointing out that it is 'the very concept at the heart of Margaret Thatcher's free-market philosophy'. But is not the very premise of *Is There Anyone Here From Education?* that we must take up the terms offered by the right and transform them into a programme of the left? Why the terrain of 'standards', mapped out by Thatcherite educationalists, should be the *only* one in which the writers in this book have pitched their tent, is a mystery; the words 'freedom' 'development' 'individual' and

'personal' are used throughout it, by all contributors, in only the most negative manner – as though they were *self-evidently* reactionary. But the point is that key concepts can be appropriated by either left or right, and neither has a monopoly on 'freedom' and 'development'. It is just as important to win these ideals of liberation *back* from the right as it is to rush in and grapple for the flag of 'standards' and 'skills'. The two are not alternatives. But the way much of the left is currently falling over itself to take over right-wing ground and terminology is evident on all fronts – from the Kinnock-esque eagerness to condemn 'violent picketing' and so on, the echo of Thatcher's every verbal initiative, to the way that the theoreticians of the left will now spare no effort to prove that they can be as hard-headed and anti-empirical as any monetarist.

I would suggest that what puts most people off the ideas of the left is not their lax liberalism but the rigidity with which they are propounded, especially by those who do not stop to consider that their approach owes as much to patriarchal structures as to systematic left-wing thought. The hostility towards 'experience' found in the articles and attitudes of the writers I have mentioned is connected, in the long run, with the reasons for the failure of the left to win people's 'hearts and minds' as well as their votes: you have to make your ideas – the concepts and principles Stuart Hall mentions – *relevant* to the specific people you want to understand them. How do you get somebody to understand an abstraction? By relating it to the reality that it is an abstraction *of*. Only in this way can people learn to manipulate, and form new abstractions; without that intimate and complex relationship between their own experience and the conceptual plane which allows the possibility of representing, and *changing* experience, all they learn is the concepts and principles as a pattern or system, complete in itself.

A detailed account of primary school children learning to manipulate the concepts they inhabit is found in Carolyn Steedman's fascinating book, *The Tidy House*. Through their collaborative writing of the title story, 'The Tidy House', the little girls she describes not only found a way of representing their own, restrictively 'feminine' working-class lives, they also gained access to *wielding* this representation; and this allowed them, in Steedman's words, to 'critically

confront the way things are and dimly imagine, out of those very circumstances, the way things might be'.⁴

I cite this book because it is one of the very, very few which actually raise and share that greatly hidden aspect of teaching – which is, how people *learn*. Another book which goes into teaching method itself and describes a process of learning literacy is *Teacher*, by Sylvia Ashton-Warner. She teaches reading and writing by allowing children initially to *choose* the words they wish to learn – thus ensuring one of her basic principles which is that 'first words must mean something to a child'. As she says, 'If you were a child, which vocabulary would you prefer? Your own or the one at present in the New Zealand infant rooms? Come John come. Look John look. Come and look. See the boats? The vocabulary of the English upper middle class, two dimensional and respectable?'⁵

While I would dispute many of the premises of this book (I can hear people in sociology departments and the Institute of Education groaning at its very mention), I still find its description of method and practice not only rivetting reading, but appropriate to my own experience of teaching much older pupils. Ashton-Warner's comments on the teaching of basic literary skills to primary school children still have some bearing on the teaching of basic *conceptual* skills at a later stage. The premise of her 'chosen key words' method is that if a child chooses a word that means a lot to her/him, then s/he is much more likely to learn and remember it and so will not only gain access to linguistic skills faster, but will have the sense, from the very start, that these skills are something s/he can manipulate and can *use* – not, as for so many children, something imposed from the outside which they pit their wills against all the way. It is very likely that those students who *reach* the upper layers of academia where the most vociferous 'anti-liberal' teaching theorists work, are precisely those who have *not* 'taken against' learning from the start. What I have found, however, in teaching students who are primarily learning non-academic 'skills' or 'crafts' – and who have 'cultural studies' or 'general studies'

forced on them unchosen, is that many of them have experienced their entire education hitherto as some kind of external structure which makes either less or more assault on them, and which in almost *every* case, has made them feel that 'ideas' and 'complexities' and 'abstractions' are somehow weapons used *against* them, not tools for their own use.

It is perhaps significant that these detailed and perceptive accounts of actual teaching situations are written by women teachers. As Carolyn Steedman points out, 'Teaching is an example of a work situation that preserves in its organisational hierarchy the division between those who evolve theories and map out schemata for operation and those who do the work, but who are also supposed to be minor and admiring partners in the theoretical process.' It is frequently (though by no means always) left to the 'caring' woman teacher, whose life's conditioning in her 'feminine' role has helped to evolve a sensitivity to other people's needs and problems, to carry out, in practice, all those 'humanist' functions within education; dealing with the psychological and cultural crises which so frequently accompany major conceptual upheaval. This work will continue to be left to individual 'caring' teachers – a possibility Ian Connell rightly criticises in his rejection of the 'radical enclave' idea – until a recognition of these problems is *built into* precisely the 'wider' educational strategy of people like him. To repeat what I have said before, identities are at stake in social concepts, people's sense of themselves is embedded in particular ideologies, and in learning to *handle*, not merely *live within* their conceptual structures, students do go through fundamental re-definitions of their sense of themselves. As Stuart Hall says, it is being confined to one's own experience that has produced 'working class racism and sexism'. Of course. But how do you set about *teaching* children or students who are racist or sexist? Far from suggesting that experience should be 'left alone' I have been suggesting that it should be transformed. I am still waiting for the experts to come up with a practical suggestion of *how* to teach, for example, cultural studies to a racist student, or media studies to sexist boys. I do not, as Connell claims, claim to have 'answers', but I have been forced to devise methods.

And these methods have to take into account the individual students in question (which is why

⁴ Carolyn Steedman, *The Tidy House*, London, Virago, 1982, p157.

⁵ Sylvia Ashton-Warner, *Teacher*, London, Virago, 1980, pp 40-41.

my descriptions in 'Girl No. 20' were not prescriptions). Valerie Walkerdine, in *Is There Anyone Here From Education?*, criticises the notion of a child's 'development at its own pace' in her attack on 'liberatory' education.⁶ But the fact is, as any teacher knows, that people *cannot* learn something which, for whatever reasons, they are not ready to learn. The concept of resistance, borrowed from psychoanalysis (an area surely crucially relevant to education but completely scorned by the new no-nonsense brand of educational theorist) is appropriate here. The teacher in *theory* may be trying to teach a given 'curriculum' (one of the main current concerns) but in *practice* she is spending at least half of her time dealing with the resistance to whatever is being taught. It is all very well just to 'teach basic conceptual skills', but a student who is alienated, tense, or threatened will not *learn* them. I would not dream of suggesting that the child, or student, has some 'natural self' which is just waiting to come out if given enough freedom (this is the idea most hated by all contributors to *Is There Anyone...*), but what I *would* suggest is that it is impossible for anyone to learn unless their own wishes and drives are tapped to provide the momentum for learning, rather than resisting learning. Further, while as Walkerdine says, the notion of the 'true self' is obviously a historical and ideological one, since we all get by day to day by feeling that we *do* have 'selves', I'd point out that it is by and large the *middle-class* which has the most opportunities for expressing their 'true selves'—which makes possible the luxury of holding hard-line positions attacking 'liberalism' and 'self-expression' in education for *working-class* kids.

For many of the graphic design students who come into my second year seminar group at Art School, it is the first time in any educational institution that they have been asked to speak and criticise and put forward their own ideas. It is necessary to strike a balance between 'putting across' basic concepts on my part, and giving them *space* to think and talk—something they are unused to. And very often it is precisely the kids who have 'done best' at school who are least willing to speak and try things out—a sad indict-

ment of their education. Almost invariably it is the most rebellious who are the most talkative. Year after year this leaves me pondering on the way that the 'good' students are the quietest and the 'bad' ones the most lively—and, to my mind, the most perceptively critical. Surely this says something about the method and *style* of education, as well as its content? And should not the left give this area of teaching some consideration, not instead of but as well as the questions of curriculum and standards of which Sir Keith Joseph is as fond as they are?

Why is it that a large number of the leading left academic writers on education spend almost as much energy attacking 'liberatory' educational aims as they do the Tory education cuts? It is because they are attempting to throw off, not someone *else's* position, but their *own* past. It is time for disassociation from the ideals of the '60s—ideals which formed most of these very people in their student days. Stuart Hall draws attention to the 'bad faith' of teachers (though it is not clear exactly who he means) 'who themselves have learned to manipulate, symbolically at least, two worlds, in effect, patronizing kids with the view that all they needed to know was what they had already absorbed through their pores at "the great university of ordinary life".' With great skill, Hall is not criticising, but *parodying* the 'opposing' position so that, in effect, no sensible person could disagree with him. And nobody does. For no one really expects children or students to learn everything they need 'through their pores' or 'on the streets'.

But there is another kind of 'bad faith' which I detect in current educational writing, in particular the book Hall himself introduces, which, instead of denying working-class kids access to the intellectual apparatuses that we as teachers manipulate, denies them some of the expressive freedom which we take for granted even in the simple fact that we have *chosen* our walk of life and are in the classroom through our own wishes—while they are in it by legal requirement.

One of the worst inequalities of class difference in this country is the unequal access to means of expression and public speech. Middle-class 'professions', social channels and leisure activities incorporate to an enormous degree the assumption that one has something to *say* and that if it is said, some people at least will listen. Putting working-class children on the road to those professions and milieux where they might

⁶ Valerie Walkerdine, 'It's Only Natural: Rethinking Child-Centred Pedagogy', in Wolpe and Donald (eds), *op cit*, pp 79-87.

be *heard*, involves more than the process of teaching them conceptual and analytical skills, though these are important. No one who has been taught *at* and precisely *not* encouraged to 'express themselves' is likely to have the necessary confidence and familiarity with being listened to which those of us who, for example, write and teach, take for granted.

My article 'Girl No. 20' was *about* the teaching of conceptual skills and the difficulties which necessarily arise if we are to do exactly what Connell, Hall, Walkerdine and others like James Donald and Jim Grealy in *Is There Anyone Here From Education?* suggest – lead students to explore beyond the blinkers of their own experience. This moving beyond one's own experience to understand both it and other experiences in a critical context, is, we are all agreed, exactly what education is about. So it is hard to understand the *vehemence* of the current attack on 'liberatory' education. Surely it is the *combination* of experience with theory that has made us Marxists? Certainly I became a Marxist and a feminist because concepts within Marxism and feminism best explained my experience of the world, not because they seemed like the 'best' theories. In fact, it was at school and at Technical College during the late sixties and early seventies that I learned to make sense of these theories partly by relating them to the oppressiveness in, and ideologies of, those institutions.

Yes, I *do* believe in what Walkerdine criticises as 'child-centred' or 'student-centred' education, in the sense that, without the child or the student, there *is* no education – only us with all our fine ideas and no one to teach them to! All dressed up and no place to go. Walter Benjamin has said that the best ideas are no use if they do not make something useful of the person who holds them; on an even simpler level, I would add that the best ideas don't even exist if there isn't anyone to hold them. If we cannot get the 'radical curriculum' *across*, or arouse the necessary *interest* in the 'basic skills', there is no point to them. But in any case, which do we ultimately care more about: our ideas, or the child/student we are trying to teach them to?

There doesn't *have* to be a choice. But the Tories have made it quite clear that they care nothing for the actual pupils within the education system they are bent on destroying, only for the inculcation of their own ideologies.

Why is it that again and again, instead of challenging the categories and precepts of the right, the left must set up its standards *within* them? Stuart Hall says of those in power that 'they' hide away knowledge because it is power – if it wasn't, 'they would be giving it away at street corners'. But, he says, we have to 'take it' – it will not just 'float down the street'. Now while I wholeheartedly agree with the sentiment behind this, it seems to me a rather unfortunate metaphor for something which, in fact, cannot just be 'given' like a parcel, because as he himself says, it cannot just 'tell itself' – 'it has to be *told and learned*.' In other words, it involves a *process* – something which all these writers are the first to point out about, say, film, media images, meanings in other social structures. In education, as in everything else, part of the meaning lies in the way it is done. Or, to put it in theoretical terms, the signifier has a meaning, the signified does not just present itself. *In no other field* would this level be so systematically ignored as it is now being in the politics of educational theory.

And the point at which these politics become concrete is the classroom. Perhaps this is the most neglected end of the educational debate because it is the hardest to generalise about. But the silence in which actual classroom experiences are shrouded comes partly from the distance between theorists and teachers (with some exceptions). Theories on education not only have to sound good in the rhetoric of a wider political debate – they have to *work*. 'Empiricism' is a tag often used as an attack by people who don't want to put theories to the test. In teaching, like it or not, concepts and theories *are* put to the test constantly by pupils who will, ultimately, gauge their usefulness by application to their own experience. Whether this is right or wrong, it is what actually happens; and I would rather teach with the grain than against it. The whole point about Sissy Jupe, 'Girl No. 20' in *Hard Times*, was that she came from a circus and her father was 'in the horse-riding'. She thus had considerable experience of horses before encountering Mr Gradgrind's question. But his definition offered her nothing that could relate to, let alone transform, that experience. Theories may be abstract, but change is concrete. And if theories are to bring about change (as I hope they will) they and their propounders must be a little less scornful of the concrete, practical reality of other people's experience.

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute

over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.

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—Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

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